

ME AND MARY

*An African American Grandma,
The Grandson She Raised, and
The Lessons She Taught Him.*

R D Moore

BACK BOOK COVER

WHAT MAKES AN ORDINARY LIFE EXTRAORDINARY?

Me and Mary tells the story of Mary Moore, a woman of remarkable grace and courage, and the life lessons she both learned and passed on to the grandson she raised. It's about how she and the family she built gave a little boy love powerful enough to see him through subsequent years plagued by violence, poverty, and almost unimaginable adversity. And it's about how she accomplished this in late 60s and 70s Birmingham—at that time, the most racially oppressive city in America.

Told through the eyes of that grandson, we see Mary as the strong matriarch who refused to be crushed by the indignities of her world, one where being female and Negro, poor and Southern, the daughter of sharecroppers and orphaned, were all counted against her, all in a culture ruled by segregation during the day and where the KKK roamed at night. Still, she'd overcome—never allowing herself to be broken or ever ceasing to believe the best in humanity. And throughout her life, in a million small, quiet ways, she'd endeavor to pass those virtues of faith and fortitude on.

Mary's story is that of a Southern domestic. Her daily radius was less than five miles, and her role as pastor's wife and mother, almost entirely behind the scenes. Still, the ripple effects of her life would touch everything, from the Civil Rights movement to race relations, from the AIDS epidemic to the election of the first African American president. As a result, her life reminds us of our immense power—that each of us, no matter who society tries to tell us that we are, has it within us to shape the fate of the world itself.

Me and Mary

*An African American Grandma,
The Grandson She Raised, and
The Lessons She Taught Him.*

R.D. Moore



MMI Press – Seattle, Washington

Copyright © 2024 by RD Moore

All rights reserved.

The events and conversations in this book have been set down to the best of the author's ability, although some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Published in the United States by MMI Press, Seattle WA,
www.marymooreinstitute.org

First Edition

PREFACE

Though it's been years since my grandmother died, for me, it still feels recent, or, even like she's still here. Mary was, and is, my greatest teacher, the person I've tried most to emulate, and the North Star in my constellation. She was the first "mother" I knew, the one person to whom I could always tell anything, and she and I had a bond so unique, I couldn't begin to do it justice.

Throughout my adult life, people have said to me, "You ought to write about your life." But it is not my story that I feel compelled to tell. It's hers. And the only way to explain why she's so significant to me is by telling her story through the lens of my own, and how the lessons I learned, simply by being in her orbit, shaped the course of my life and every good thing I've done in it.

My name is Rodney David Moore. This is my story, as well as that of Mary Charles Moore's, whose fingerprints are all over my life; probably in more ways than I even know.

This is our story - the story of me and Mary.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated:

To all the grandparents who have done a second tour of duty as parents.

To all those who have lavished children to whom they weren't tied by normal bonds of family with love, and who, in doing so, have proven, once again that "mother" and "father" are verbs.

To all those who have lived lives of quiet, revolutionary humanity; looking into the eyes of strangers and seeing friends, building bridges instead of barriers, and who, through a lifetime of small choices, left the world itself better than they found it.

To the individuals, many of whom are no longer with us, who, upon meeting a shy, bookish kid from Birmingham, embraced him, cared for him, and enriched his life in countless ways.

And, of course, to Mary.

CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	5
DEDICATION.....	6
CONTENTS.....	7
40 SPIRITUAL LESSONS	10
PLAYLIST.....	12
PART ONE.....	14
Getting Here	14
Dock of the Bay.....	20
Martin and Bobby.....	26
Trains	35
Stormy Weather	42
Big Kids’ School.....	46
Aunt Wing.....	52
Mary’s Boys.....	57
“Your Mother’s Coming to Get You”	64
PART TWO.....	69
The Heart of Resilience.....	69
Crucibles	78
The Man Without Fear	86
Make Me Wanna Holler.....	92
EZ Supermarket	100

Stanley	106
Just For Ourselves.....	111
Can't Smile Without You.....	120
Somebody's Angel	128
Little Joe.....	137
Cleaning Bricks.....	143
Seeing Around Corners	149
Don't Come Back	156
PART THREE	161
Norman, Oklahoma	161
My First Week.....	168
Don't Make Me Come Out There	173
Writing Letters.....	176
Christmas.....	181
Tim and Samir	189
Three Remarkable Women.....	198
Leader of the Band	205
My Girls.....	211
Beneath a Western Sky.....	217
PART FOUR	222
What's in Our Hearts	222
Our Great Work	231
He Already Knew	238
The City of Brotherly Love	245

Me and Mary

What We Leave Behind	251
When the Good Lord Says it's Time.....	258
The Big Visit	265
Epilogue	272
About the Author	285
MEDIA GUIDE	286
Link to Spotify Playlist.....	286
Speeches and Addresses.....	287
Books and Articles	287
Films and Television.....	288

40 SPIRITUAL LESSONS

Part One

1. Getting Here – *Destiny*
2. Dock of the Bay – *Family*
3. Martin and Bobby – *Resolve*
4. Trains – *Faith*
5. Stormy Weather – *Wonder*
6. Big Kids School – *Gentleness*
7. Aunt Wing – *Honor*
8. Mary's Boys – *Heritage*
9. Your Mama's Coming to Get You – *Selflessness*

Part Two

10. The Heart of Resilience – *Will*
11. Crucibles – *Humanity*
12. The Man Without Fear – *Courage*
13. Make Me Wanna Holler – *Forgiveness*
14. EZ Supermarket – *Conscience*
15. Stanley – *Diligence*
16. Just For Ourselves – *Dignity*
17. Can't Smile Without You – *Justice*
18. Somebody's Angel – *Gratitude*
19. Little Joe – *Blessing*
20. Cleaning Bricks – *Prudence*
21. Seeing Around Corners – *Forbearance*
22. Don't Come Back – *Hope*

Part Three

23. Norman, Oklahoma – *Goodness*
24. My First Week – *Kindness*

Me and Mary

25. Don't Make Me Come Out There – *Fortitude*
26. Writing Letters – *Acceptance*
27. Christmas – *Clarity*
28. Tim and Samir – *Benevolence*
29. Three Remarkable Women – *Power*
30. Leader of the Band – *Love*
31. My Girls – *Assurance*
32. Beneath a Western Sky – *Celebration*

Part Four

33. Dock of the Bay, Revisited – *Empathy*
34. Our Great Work – *Calling*
35. He Already Knew – *Bravery*
36. The City of Brotherly Love – *Compassion*
37. What We Leave Behind – *Legacy*
38. When the Good Lord Says It's Time – *Valor*
39. The Big Visit – *Virtue*
40. Epilogue – *Presence*

PLAYLIST

Music has always been a primal shaping force in my life. It therefore makes sense that so much of it would show up here. Below are all the songs referenced throughout Me and Mary, in the order in which they appear. Together, they're not only a kind of soundtrack of my life, but serve as a telling of the book's story in musical form.

The entire playlist can be heard on [Spotify](#) or on [Pandora](#).

1. *Strange Fruit* – Billie Holiday
2. *We Are* – Sweet Honey in the Rock
3. *(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay* – Otis Redding
4. *Abraham, Martin And John* – Dion
5. *Don't Move My Mountain* – Inez Andrews
6. *King of the Road* – Roger Miller
7. *Oh, Susanna* – Pete Seeger
8. *Miss Celie's Blues (Sister)* – The Color Purple
9. *Bad, Bad, Leroy Brown* – Jim Croce
10. *Ben* – Michael Jackson
11. *Oh, Girl* – Chi Lites
12. *Mr. Bojangles* – Nitty Gritty Dirt Band
13. *Dream a Little Dream of Me* – The Mamas & the Papas
14. *Mockingbird* – Carly Simon & James Taylor
15. *Ventura Highway* – America
16. *Fast Car* – Tracy Chapman
17. *I Am a Rock* – Simon and Garfunkel
18. *History of Us* – Indigo Girls
19. *I'll Take You There* – Staple Singers
20. *Ball of Confusion* – Temptations
21. *In the Ghetto* – Elvis Presley
22. *Inner City Blues* – Marvin Gaye
23. *Lovin' You* – Minnie Riperton
24. *Living for the City* – Stevie Wonder
25. *Three is a Magic Number* – Bob Dorough
26. *Boy From New York City* – Manhattan Transfer
27. *He's So Shy* – Pointer Sisters

28. *'65 Love Affair* – Paul Davis
29. *Can't Smile Without You* – Barry Manilow
30. *Calling All Angels* – Jane Siberry & KD Lang
31. *Chain Gang* – Sam Cooke
32. *Everybody's Talkin'* – Harry Nilsson
33. *Drivin' My Life Away* – Eddie Rabbit
34. *We Are Family* – Sister Sledge
35. *Celebrate Me Home* – Kenny Loggins
36. *I Guess That's Why They Call It The Blues* – Elton John
37. *You've Got a Friend* – James Taylor
38. *Sisters Are Doin' it for Themselves* – Eurhythmic and Aretha Franklin
39. *The New Jerusalem* – Sensational Nightingales
40. *Loves Me Like A Rock* – Dixie Hummingbirds
41. *Leader Of The Band* – Dan Fogelberg
42. *Let's Stay Together* – Al Green
43. *Fire* – Pointer Sisters
44. *My Girl* – Temptations
45. *Hip To Be Square* – Huey Lewis and the News
46. *The Boxer* – Simon and Garfunkel
47. *OU Chant* – University of Oklahoma Chorus
48. *San Francisco (Be Sure To Wear Flowers In Your Hair)* – Scott McKenzie
49. *Let It Be* – Beatles
50. *I'm Alright* – Kenny Loggins
51. *Streets of Philadelphia* – Bruce Springsteen
52. *Summer Breeze* – Seals and Croft
53. *Celebration* – Kool and the Gang
54. *How Can I Keep From Singing?* – Enya
55. *O Mary Don't You Weep* – Bruce Springsteen and the Seeger Sessions Band
56. *Have I Told You Lately* – Van Morrison
57. *Beaming From Heaven* – Dixie Hummingbirds
58. *Precious Lord* – Traditional
59. *Three Times A Lady* – Commodores
60. *Proud Mary* – Ike and Tina Turner
61. *Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me* – Gladys Knight & the Pips
62. *If These Walls Could Speak* – Amy Grant

PART ONE

Getting Here

1. Destiny

Though college friends would shorten my first name to “Rod” and would come to know me by my then last name “Washington”, I was born Rodney Moore.

As I understand it, I was named after “Rodney Harrington,” the TV character played by Ryan O’Neal on the show *Peyton Place*; given to me by my mother before she left. Ryan was apparently the heartthrob of all the girls at that time, including colored girls like Bernice. She was 14 when she got pregnant, a fact she hid from her family as long as she could.

One day, when she was already five months along, her mother noticed her standing in the kitchen in the afternoon light and exclaimed, “Bernice! Are you pregnant?!” “No ma’am,” she said, denying it. To this day, we don’t know the particulars, but apparently, that’s when she panicked and sought out an abortion.

What we do know is that the process, done in someone’s bathtub, was far more dangerous then, than it is now, and my grandmother nearly lost both of us.

Whether she changed her mind or something went wrong, we're not sure. But the result was severe hemorrhaging that sent Bernice into pre-term labor. The next call my grandmother received was from the hospital. "Your daughter's alive," they said, "And so is your grandson." That's how Mary, my grandmother, found out about me. No one knew who my father was, so I received Mary's last name – Moore.

What I find amazing are the parallels to her life, or at least, what little we know of it. Mary was a storyteller. And I never grew tired of hearing them. I remember spending time with her in the kitchen, her cooking and me helping. We'd be shelling peas, seasoning greens or stirring cornbread batter, and she'd tell me stories.

She'd talk about my birth, and bringing me home from the hospital, and the civil rights movement. She'd talk about her kids, her relatives and other important people in her life. She'd talk about the tragic deaths of John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert, and Martin Luther King, who for her, were a trinity of sorts. And on occasion, if you caught her in the right mood, she'd talk about herself and her childhood – her "coming up," as she called it.

We don't know my grandmother's birth year. Nor did she. Mary was born in a time when Negroes were denied birth certificates. All she knew was that it was shortly before or after 1920, just after the Great War, and during a time when people were flocking to theaters to see the film, *The Clansman*, which had changed its name to *Birth of a Nation*. She was born into a world where women themselves had neither voice nor vote, and that was before accounting for what it meant to be colored, poor and southern.

Her parents were, according to what she was told about them, sharecroppers, and subject to the post-Emancipation laws ratified in the South. Those “black codes” created an indentured servitude for Negroes that endured long after the Civil War and the 13th Amendment.

Section 3 of the Louisiana Black Codes; which became the template for such laws throughout the entire South, stated, “No negro shall be permitted to rent or keep a house within said parish.” Section 9 of the Codes said, “No negro shall sell, barter, or exchange any articles of merchandise or traffic within said parish.”

And section 4 stated: “Every negro is required to be in the regular service of some white person, or former owner, who shall be held responsible for the conductor of said negro.” Add on to this the lynchings rampant throughout the South, the wrath of the Great Depression, and the rise of Jim Crow, and you have at least a sense of what her world was like.

She would have been in her late teens or early twenties in 1939 when both Billie Holiday’s *Strange Fruit*, which told of the horrors of lynchings, and the film *Gone with the Wind*, which romanticized southern life during slavery, were released; not to mention the onset of WWII.

Mary also never knew her birth day. She chose April 11th at random because her kids kept asking her when her birthday was. Her mother died during childbirth and her father, not long after. April 11th gave her kids something to celebrate; a day to bake her birthday cake and make her gifts. She didn’t even know who it was that named her.

“Whoever it was,” I remember saying to myself as a boy, “They weren’t very creative.” They’d named her Mary Smith. “Mary” and “Smith” – the two absolute most common names in the entire English language. She had one older brother, who was taken in by an aunt, but the aunt couldn’t handle both him and a newborn. So, she was passed around from relative to relative, until she got out on her own.

In that environment, she still managed to get a sixth-grade education; the equivalent of a college degree today, and far more than the average Alabama man, whether white or colored. My grandmother was an orphan essentially from the day she was born. I think that’s why she was so fixated on that blanket.

A few hours after my birth, Bernice, full of remorse, secreted out of the hospital and disappeared before her mother got there. I was in an incubator, where I would spend the first several months of my life. It was Mary who came to see me every day; often with one of my aunts or uncles in tow. She told me that when she looked through the glass and saw me – her firstborn grandson – she cried.

They told her to prepare herself to lose me; that it would take a miracle for an infant that sick, and that early, to survive. But she said with absolute certainty, “You’re wrong. He’s coming home. One day, he’s gonna come home.” From then on, she showed up every single day to talk to me through that glass, telling me that I’d be coming home soon.

Sweet Honey in the Rock describes what was welling up within Mary this way: *“For each child that’s born, a morning star rises and sings to the universe who we are. We are our grandmother’s prayers, we are our grandfather’s dreamings, we are the breath of*

our ancestors, we are the spirit of God.” She was working as a housekeeper for a nice family that lived “over the mountain” – a euphemism for wealthy and white.

She quit riding the bus and started saving her bus fare, along with S&H Green Stamps, to buy me a blanket. She said, when I came home, it was going to be in one of those nice blankets like the wealthy kids get – not some flimsy disposable version. This was her own way of affirming a set of truths that she’d come to know in her bones – that I was loved, that I was valuable, that I was as good as any other kid coming out of that hospital, and that I would come out.

Each morning that she opted to walk to work, rather than take the bus, and each evening that she spent talking with me through the glass, she was making her faith manifest; grounding me, by sheer force of will, in this place, and in her heart. I’m amazed and saddened that she was able to give me these gifts, but that they were ones she, as a little girl, wasn’t given.

Mary would tell me that story, I think, to assure me that I belonged. And from both her words and her every action, I understood that. I remember once, when I was older, asking her what would’ve happened if I hadn’t made it. “You mean, if you hadn’t been born?” she asked, and I nodded my head. “Well,” she said, “I believe you were meant to be here, so God would have gotten you here some other way, except it would’ve been another family that got to have you.”

“That got to have you.” Even then, she was telling me something important about who I was, and at the same time, affirming my

worth, both to her and to the world; that I was a joy and not a burden.

But hearing that story over and over again would teach me an equally important lesson; that each of us, through our thoughts and imaginings, prayers and actions, can change the course of rivers and shape fate, we can call heaven down and perform miracles. We can rewrite destiny.

As a result, Mary would prove the best doctors in Birmingham wrong – after 6 months, 12 days, she would, just as she'd predicted, bring me home, wrapped in a new, fancy blanket.

Dock of the Bay

2. Family

They say that the first few years of a child's life are critical, as they lay the foundation for how they will develop in years to come. If that's the case, then I was immeasurably blessed.

The house I came home to; the dynamic, chaotic, laughter-and-love-filled environment I experienced during those early years, could not have been more beneficial. I don't believe any child, wealthy or not, was better cared for than I was. My grandmother saw to that. But it wasn't just her. Mary, who never experienced what it was like to be surrounded by loving family, had created just that. She had nine kids – 6 boys and 3 girls – with my mother being right in the middle.

When I was born, Mary's youngest were twin boys, Ron and Don, who were 8 years old at the time. In many ways, they and my Aunt Pat, my grandmother's youngest daughter, were my older siblings. Her elder children were wonderful caregivers in my early life, and they went to great lengths to ensure that I was loved and well cared for.

One of my first memories is from when I was just shy of 3 years old. I was playing in the upper tier of the front yard when I saw my

Uncle Sid (Aunt Naomi's husband), walking up the stairs smiling, with something amazing in his hand. It was a big group of floating, intensely colorful globes; all tied to strings and suspended in the air above his head.

Though this was long before I understood anything about helium or concepts such as, "lighter than air," I was an intensely curious child who spent time trying to grasp exactly how many tiny people lived inside that television box, and what their lives were like when they weren't on stage. The balloons had me completely and utterly mesmerized.

My Uncle Sid, who everyone called Pee Wee, was anything but. He was six-foot-six, thin as a rail, and quite handsome, with a yellowish complexion and facial hair just on his chin. He and my Aunt Naomi were quite the striking couple, opposites in so many ways. She was a healthy woman, big, dark and beautiful. She had a legendary voice – the range of a soprano with the strength of a contralto – and she was constantly singing. And laughing.

In many ways, her personality was captured by Oprah Winfrey's character in *The Color Purple* – Ms. Sofia. She and my Uncle Sid were perfect for each other. Whenever I saw him, he had a smile on his face and always, some kind of gift or treat in his hand. He crouched down, ruffled my hair, and gave me the balloons. I stood there for what seemed like forever with my arm extended and my neck crooked, spellbound.

They tell me that everyone gathered on the porch; amused at how stock-still I stood and how awestruck I appeared. At some point, someone made a noise, and I turned around. And I opened my hand. I remember seeing my bouquet of color float up into the sky,

and I doubt I've ever seen anything more beautiful. It wasn't until they were completely out of sight that I realized that they weren't coming back.

And that's when I cried. I ran to Uncle Sid, who picked me up and held me. "Tell you what," he said, "How about I bring you more balloons next time? Would you like that?" I nodded my head, tears still flowing. "Ok," he said tenderly, "But you've got to stop crying, alright?" All the while rubbing my back.

I remember, years later, asking my grandmother about the balloon incident. "Oh yeah," she said, remembering it right away, and chuckling with amusement. "We thought you were going to have a fit," she said, "But you didn't. You were always such a quiet child."

From the beginning, I was well loved. It apparently took my grandmother and grandfather, my Uncle Robert and my Aunt Naomi years to pay off my initial hospital bill. And it didn't stop there. I started racking up more medical bills right away. Being such a premie, I was always a sickly child. I had arrhythmia, epilepsy, tuberculosis, anemia, GI complications and suffered from pleural effusions, requiring me to have an intercostal drain installed.

I had pneumonia a couple times a year, had asthma, allergies, and was severely visually impaired with glasses strapped to my face by one of those behind-the-head elastic bands. All told, early on, I spent upward of a hundred days-per-year in hospital beds. I doubt if I would have survived in many other households.

My Aunt Naomi, a famed wedding cake maker, also worked in a high school cafeteria part-time, and one of my best memories from

early childhood is waking up from my nap every day, which was between 1:00 and 2:00.

Usually, one of the soap operas (which Mary called, her “stories”, as in, “Don’t be making all that racket while my story’s on”), *All My Children* or *One Life to Live*, (I can’t remember which) was just coming on. One of my twin uncles – Don or Ron – would put me down and sit with me until I fell asleep. Both my small front bedroom and the twins’ larger one in the back were in the attic; on either side of the staircase.

The space had been converted by my granddad Olden, and I loved it – especially the slanted walls that met at the peak and the dormered windows, which felt like a lookout. I’d always wake up to the sound of my Aunt Naomi’s big, booming voice coming from downstairs, the sound of the *General Hospital* opening in the background. And always, she brought me a little square piece of cafeteria cake and a small carton of milk, like the big kids drank at school.

My grandma’s living room had one of those large record players. I don’t even know what they were officially called, but it was about the size of a small living room sofa. Polished wood, finished legs and large, encased speakers, they were designed to look like fine pieces of furniture, which they were.

Hers had a lid that opened up on the right side, and where one would place the records on the turntable. It played both albums and 45 singles, but the 45s required a little red or yellow disc in the middle. I’ve always had a propensity for music, and at three years of age, I knew how to operate this machine. My Uncle Ron taught me.

And for some reason, I loved the song, (*Sittin' on*) *The Dock of the Bay*, by Otis Redding. Something about the music and melancholy vocals spoke to me, and still do. Though I couldn't yet read "big words", I could recognize this single by the symbol and (carefully!) put it on.

I'd then pull up my stool next to the stereo and listen. When it reached the end, I'd start it over. I remember sitting there, trying to understand with my 3-year-old mind what a "docadabay" was; this thing that he was sitting on. "I wonder if it's like my stool," I pondered.

I would often go in and grab my grandmother by the hand and silently pull her into the living room, with her asking, "What is it, Baby?" I'd have her sit down on the couch and I'd lay next to her with my head in her lap, and we'd listen. Sometimes, tired after a long day of work, she'd fall asleep, and I'd stay there, knowing that if I did, she'd get a bit of rest.

Even now, I can still feel the complete and utter sense of assurance I had, seeking the comfort of my grandmother's lap. Somehow, despite all she had going on, she'd so constantly dropped everything to attend to my needs that I never doubted she would.

And that never changed. Mary would, by her actions, teach the little boy I was, everything I needed to know about what being on the receiving end of genuine love feels like, and by extension, what it means to give it to others.

Those stolen moments where we sat together listening to a simple song, just me and Mary, was a rare and precious gift; one I've come to realize that so few of my adult friends received when they were

young. So, while I had no real understanding of the greater workings of the world, even back then, I knew two things; that I was a lucky little boy, and that I loved this woman with all my heart.

Looking back, I had no idea how radically my world would shift, or the immense trials I, starting as a four-year-old, would have to endure. But those otherwise unremarkable moments, of family gathered and heads in laps, of balloons and being held while we cry, were tiny fractals of something infinitely more powerful; the kind of love that, when given to us, can enable us to overcome anything.

And *Dock of the Bay*? It would not only be the first song I'd recall from my very early childhood, but my first memory. Who knew that one day, I'd end up calling the same bay that inspired that song, my home.

Martin and Bobby

3. Resolve

I was born sandwiched between the passage of the *Civil Rights Act* and the *Voting Rights Act*; after the assassination of Medgar Evers and before that of Malcolm X, after the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and before the equally historic Poor People's Campaign; which included a march of thousands of women, led by Coretta Scott King on Mother's Day, and the construction of Resurrection City – a temporary settlement of tents and shacks built on the Capitol Mall – a precursor to the Occupy movement that would emerge forty years later.

There, in the home of my childhood, less than a mile away from the infamous Birmingham Jail, on the living room wall, above the mantel, hang a clock. Behind the hands were three individual photos – John F. Kennedy on the left, Martin Luther King in the middle, and Robert F. Kennedy on the right. This commemorative edition was released shortly after Robert's death. Mary loved that clock, and she loved those men.

I'll never forget the day Martin died. I didn't understand what was going on, but there was a profound sense of sorrow everywhere. I've never in my life seen so many adults crying. Men and women, in my household and on the streets, everyone was weeping. I

remember one man, hunched over on the curb, head in hands and shoulders shaking as he silently sobbed.

I was three years old at the time, not long after the balloon incident. It seemed to hit the younger people – my grandmother’s kids and their classmates – the hardest. Perhaps because, just a few years prior, they were out marching with him.

They’d been part of the sit-ins at the downtown Woolworth’s department store lunch counter, the kneel-ins at segregated churches across town, and the marches that filled the Birmingham jail to overflowing. They’d seen dramatic and unprecedented change in an incredibly short period of time, but at the same time, having never lived through the atrocities their parents had, they were wholly unprepared for the backlash.

Birmingham, nicknamed “Bombingham” because of the number of bombs, cross burnings and lynchings that occurred with regularity, was the largest industrial city in the South. Dr. King agreed that the campaign, taking place in the spring of 1963, could not have been staged in a more appropriate place, than in the “belly of the beast.”

Along with the March on Washington in the summer of 1963, it was the Birmingham Campaign that created the national urgency that prompted the passage of the landmark *Civil Rights Act of 1964*, introduced by President John F. Kennedy, and passed posthumously. In one of the most tragic events in our country’s history, he was assassinated the year prior – November 22, 1963.

The Birmingham Campaign’s strategy was to put economic pressure on the city’s merchants, so organizers scheduled the protests to begin around the Easter season; at that time, the

second biggest shopping period of the year. Birmingham officials, however, saw in this, opportunity; a chance to break the back of the movement.

Word went out that any Negro arrested for marching, or even seen anywhere within the vicinity of the march, would never work in Birmingham again. This led to the riskiest decision of the entire campaign – to use children. Parents who were willing to put themselves at risk by marching were now called upon to exhibit a whole new kind of courage – stay at home, keep their jobs, and let their children take the lead; knowing full well that some of them might not come back alive. That's resolve.

Birmingham held its mayoral elections on March 5th. While all the leading candidates were segregationists, none of them held a candle to candidate Eugene "Bull" Connor; also Birmingham's commissioner of public safety. Concerned that the protests would be used as a political tool to drive white-identifying voters to Connor, they postponed the campaign until two weeks after the election.

The close election resulted in a runoff on April 2nd in which Albert Boutwell (after whom the Boutwell auditorium, where my uncles Don and Robert went to see professional wrestling shows) defeated Connor. Despite their defeat, the city commissioners, including Connor, refused to vacate office; arguing that they could not be legally removed until 1965. When the civil rights campaign finally launched in early April, Birmingham was operating under two governments.

Martin was arrested on April 12th; charged with violating the state circuit court injunction against protests. He was kept in solitary

confinement and was allowed minimal direct contact. It was at this time that he penned his famous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, on scraps of paper clandestinely passed on to him by a friendly Negro trusty (a fellow inmate assigned certain supervisory duties by guards), and on the margins of the *Birmingham News*, in direct response to an open letter posted there.

That letter, titled “*A Call for Unity*,” and signed by eight white-identifying Birmingham and Montgomery clergy, stated that while they sympathized with the cause, that these were matters that should be settled in the courts rather than in the streets, and that the “good” people of Birmingham should not allow themselves to be incited by “outsiders”.

Given that a similar open letter – “*An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense*” – had been written just three months prior, Martin knew that this narrative had to be countered, and countered immediately. By summer, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* was everywhere. In the meantime, United Auto Workers president, Walter Reuther, secured \$160,000 to cover bail for Martin and other protestors, and on April 20th, they were released.

On May 2nd, more than a thousand Negro youth would descend on downtown Birmingham; marching down Eighth Avenue to City Hall. My grandmother’s kids and their classmates were among them. That day, close to 900 students were arrested, but an even greater surge – nearly 2,500 demonstrators – arrived the following day to take their place, then more after that, in successive waves.

Three of Mary’s children would join the marches, and two of them, Bernice, all of 13, and Willie James (15), were arrested, and Pat was beaten. The jails packed, city officials directed the overflow to

be kept at Alabama State Fairgrounds in Birmingham's Five Points West, and in open air stockades. They weren't being fed, so my grandmother and other mothers arranged food and took it to them.

Bull Connor, who, early on, had refrained from using violence against citizens, did what we often do in situations where we believe we have superior power; he escalated. He brought out the city's firemen and ordered them to turn their lifesaving tools into weapons. They trained their hoses on both protesters and onlookers.

You've seen the footage – kids hit with hoses so powerful that they're sent flying into the air; students knocked down and literally washed away; broken limbs, concussions and a wide range of other injuries. As some of the youth fled from the power of the hoses, Connor loosed the dogs to pursue and maul them. And thanks to a new invention called "live television", every bit of this carnage was beamed straight into homes across America.

Civil Rights leader, Congressman John Lewis, noted the power of this incident: "We didn't fully comprehend at first what was happening. We were witnessing police violence and brutality Birmingham-style: Unfortunately for Bull Connor, so was the rest of the world."

As the clashes between nonviolent protesters and police made national headlines; with pictures of officers of the law bending over women with raised clubs, children mere inches away from snarling and drooling police dogs, and pressure hoses smashing bodies into one another and sweeping them into the streets, the movement reached a new level of visibility; and the world took notice.

These were my relatives, my neighbors. They were there, at the epicenter of this pivotal point in history. And after a century of struggle, one dating back to the abolition of slavery, the world would, in what felt like the blink of an eye, change. In 1964, after the passage of the *Civil Rights Act*, the future for African Americans had never looked brighter. Four years later, on April 4, 1968, the night Martin was killed, it had never looked bleaker.

Amid the tragedy of Martin's assassination, an extraordinary moment in U.S. political history occurred as Senator Robert F. Kennedy broke the news of Martin's death to a large gathering of African American supporters in Indianapolis, Indiana.

The gathering was actually a planned campaign rally for Robert Kennedy in his bid to secure the 1968 Democratic nomination for President. Just after he arrived by plane at Indianapolis, Bobby was informed of Martin's death, and was advised against making the campaign stop; which was in a part of the city described as a "dangerous ghetto." But the senator insisted on going.

His team expected an angry mob or bereaved group of mourners. But when he arrived to find everyone in an upbeat mood, anticipating the excitement of a Kennedy appearance, it was apparent that they had not heard the news. A 42-year-old Robert climbed onto the platform, and delivered the news to this group of African Americans, in what must be one of the greatest extemporaneous speeches in American history:

Ladies and Gentlemen – I'm only going to talk to you just for a minute or so this evening. Because... I have some very sad news for all of you, and I think sad news for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world, and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and was killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee.

The crowd breaks into frantic gasps and murmuring before gradually settling into stunned silence. He continues:

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice between fellow human beings. He died in the cause of that effort. In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it's perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in.

For those of you who are black – considering the evidence evidently is that there were white people who were responsible – you can be filled with bitterness, and with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, in greater polarization – black people amongst blacks, and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another.

Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand, compassion and love.

For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and mistrust of the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I would only say that I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man.

African Americans in this country truly loved his brother, and still grieved his death, so they knew exactly to what he was referring.

But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to get beyond these rather difficult times. My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He once wrote: "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.

Robert and his team were surprised by the spontaneous outbreak of applause that interrupted his speech. He then continued:

So I ask you tonight to return home, to say a prayer for the family of Martin Luther King, yeah that's true, but more importantly to say a prayer for our own country, which all of us love – a prayer for understanding and that compassion of which I spoke. We can do well in this country.

We will have difficult times. We've had difficult times in the past. And we will have difficult times in the future. It is not the end of violence; it is not the end of lawlessness; and it's not the end of disorder. But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings that abide in our land.

He was interrupted by applause a second time, before concluding:

Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world.

Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.

Thank you very much.

And amid thunderous and emotional applause, he exited.

It's easy to see why my grandmother loved him, and why every time Dion's *Abraham, Martin and John* came on the radio, she would, as if uttering a prayer, pause and solemnly listen.

Just two months after Martin, Bobby was also gone.

But Mary would double down on the same courage that had seen her through so much, everything from defying Black Codes to allowing her children to march. And she, like so many others, would keep these men alive in her heart. She'd spend the rest of her life making real the things they'd dreamed of. Martin and Bobby had used ordinary things, such as speeches and sermons, for extraordinary purposes.

Mary and others of her generation, with everything from marches to boycotts, from the songs they wrote to the unity they forged, would teach those of us who'd come after them the same lesson: how to both embrace our own very ordinary gifts and hone our resolve into armor, then use them, as Bobby said, "*to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world*". In doing so, we change not only the world, but ourselves.

Trains

4. Faith

In many ways, my mother was an extraordinary person, or at the very least, had all the makings of one. She was considered perhaps the smartest of my grandmother's kids, with school coming easily to her. She had a personable style that made anyone want to trust her and she could engage anyone, getting them to converse with her about anything. She was beautiful, and her singing voice was legendary.

My family, as a whole, is musically gifted. At my grandmother's funeral, the pastor himself mentioned that he'd never, in all his life, seen a family with more natural talent. Bernice's dad, my grandfather Olden, was an incredible singer in his own right – one of the great gospel crooners of his time. But among all this talent, my mother was thought to be the brightest star. "The next Aretha Franklin," people used to say.

Her "go to" song was Inez Andrew's *Don't Move My Mountain*, and when word got out that Bernice was going to be singing, the church was packed. Throughout my life, I'd heard my mother singing this song, mostly, acapella. I only very recently heard Inez's recorded version and I would have bet anything it was Bernice. I played it for my sister Crystal and she had the same reaction. "I got chills," she

said. If anyone wanted to know what she sounded like, I'd tell them to give that song a listen.

My mother's biggest drawback was perhaps never believing that she, the person that she was, was, in fact, enough. For years, to me, she was a picture in a frame, albeit a beautiful one. I remember seeing her photo on the mantel and thinking to myself how much that lady looked like an older, darker version of my Aunt Pat.

Apparently, I'd talked to her on the phone on occasion, though I don't remember. But what I do remember is her showing up in Birmingham when I was four years old, to take me with her to somewhere up north. I believe it was Hartford, where she was living with Joe Washington, the guy she'd eventually marry.

I remember her asking me if I wanted to go on a train trip, which was exactly the right thing to ask me – I was as enamored with trains as I was with balloons and sittin' on the docadabay. I would have gone with anyone, anywhere, if there was a train involved.

We took Amtrak from Birmingham to Hartford. I was so excited, I had a hard time sitting still. I started off in the window seat, on my knees, with my face pressed against the window as the foggy scenery passed. Later, I remember being in the aisle seat, and getting immense pleasure from the process of purchasing a carton of milk from the "conductor", or at least, that's who I thought he was.

My mother, probably all of 19, was dressed smartly, in a beautiful coat and pillbox hat. She looked like a movie star. I was dressed in my little blue suit, the kind with the short pants, bowtie, and my favorite two-tone Buster Brown shoes. I remember all the people on the train being incredibly nice to me and the whole thing was,

for me, a dream come true. (This would have been only a few years after mandated desegregation, but I was far too young to be cognizant of such things.)

I was so into the trip itself that it never dawned on me that this wasn't just a train ride, and that I was leaving my grandma. I was going up to stay for "a while," and there was no definite plan for me to return. That's why everyone went with us to the train station. In that sense, this experience was not unlike the balloon incident – I opened my hand and let go of something that I valued a great deal – never realizing that it was never coming back. How something with such an auspicious beginning devolved so quickly, I'll never know.

I believe Bernice, thinking she was ready to be a proper mother to me, had come to get me for all the right reasons. She had a good job, working the night shift on an assembly line at Pratt & Whitney, and taking gigs as a session singer, while trying to secure a recording contract. But neither she, nor the life she was leading, was suitable for any child; let alone, a sickly one. I remember the house itself being crowded, as if a party was going on.

Bernice asked if I was hungry, and when I said yes, she made us grilled egg and cheese sandwiches; something her own mother often made. I remember standing by her side at the stove, then, us sitting alone together at the small kitchen table, and her telling me how glad she was to have me there. Shortly thereafter, she helped me, thoroughly exhausted by that time, into my pajamas; telling me that since she worked nights, someone else would be there to look after me if needed. She kissed my cheek, gave me a warm smile from the door, and was gone.

From that evening on, I remember little over the next several months. With the exception of three incidents, it's all gone. I do remember meeting Joe Washington, a giant of a man, who played semi-pro football and who scared the bejesus out of me. My mother introduced him as my new daddy, but he set that straight quite quickly. "Now, Bernice," he said, angrily, "You know damned well I ain't that boy's daddy." "Don't be putting those fucking ideas in his head."

Looking back, it's clear that their relationship was already troubled, but that neither of them had the wherewithal to work out why. "And *you*," he said, rounding on me, "Just stay the fuck away from me, you got that?" I got it. Keep in mind that up until that point, no one had ever even raised their voice at me, not to mention telling me to "stay the fuck away from them."

I didn't even know what all those words meant, exactly, though I got the general gist. No one had ever used bad language around me before. My grandmother wouldn't even let people say words like "dang" or "blasted," as in, "I can't get this blasted door opened."

Second, I remember a kind, matronly woman named Elaine. Older than Bernice, but younger than Mary, I remember sitting right next to her on the couch and reading one of my books aloud, while she sewed something in the warm lamplight, her giving appreciative murmurs and nods every so often.

I remember the way the light spilled out of the top and bottom of the lampshade, forming a pool on the ceiling and a puddle on the floor. Something about it took me back to my grandmother's house, and in doing so, gave me immense comfort. Even today, warm lamplight evokes images of home.

For the longest time, I thought of this as a dream, until once, I asked Mary if she knew of someone named Elaine from when I was in Hartford, and she exclaimed, “Elaine – that was the name of the woman who called me and told me to come get you!” I shared my memory of Elaine with Mary, and her response was one of wonderment. “Lord, have mercy,” she said plaintively, before continuing, “That just goes to show you – just cause you can’t see it, don’t mean God’s not at work!”

In her own way, she was teaching me the same truth Martin was speaking to when he said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Over the years, I’d think about that; how there’s essentially two ways to approach life – that either a prevailing goodness exists or it doesn’t. Either approach requires faith, but the one we adopt will profoundly shape the lives we lead and the legacy we leave. For my part, I’d decide early on that I wanted to lead my life the way Mary led hers; believing in goodness – even when I couldn’t see it.

The only other thing I recall from my time in that place is a hazy visual of a bathroom. All I can remember is crouching in the corner, trying to squeeze behind the toilet, trying to disappear. And I recall the silhouette of a person standing in front of the door, eclipsing a light that felt excessively harsh.

I remember seeing colors before my eyes and hearing my heart beating in my ears. And I remember being absolutely paralyzingly terrified, before everything went dark. Everything else I know about that period, I know; not from my own memories, but from my grandmother. She said that she received a call from someone who’d told her that if she didn’t come get me, they were afraid I

would not survive. She immediately got on a bus. She said, what she found when she got there, brought tears to her eyes.

Apparently, I was filthy. I'd been gone almost three months, and according to my grandmother, it looked like I hadn't been bathed since I'd left. Incredulous, she asked Bernice for the suitcase of clothes she sent with me, but they were nowhere to be found. I was despondent, intensely withdrawn, and seemed to be living in my own little world. My grandmother said I seemed to recognize her, but barely so.

According to her, my stomach was distended, I hadn't been properly cleaned after having lost control during a seizure, and worst of all, the fluid building up in my lungs had not been drained for weeks, nor had I seen a doctor the entire time I'd been there. This is all a blank to me.

The first thing Mary did was get me to a hospital. They saw me right away, and told her that had she waited even another day, I'd likely have died. They also told her that in addition to the rope burns and bruises, I had what appeared to be cigarette burns on my bottom, and there was evidence I'd been sexually abused. My grandmother was incensed – all 4'8" of her. Years later, she would still get visibly angry when telling this story.

She confronted Bernice and Joe, but both stated they knew nothing about the sexual abuse, nor the cigarette burns; which isn't as preposterous as it sounds, given the number of people constantly coming and going in that house. They said that the rope burns were from the guy who was watching me at night, a teenager himself. I'd had a seizure, and not knowing what to do about my thrashing around, he'd apparently tied me to the bed.

ME AND MARY

After the hospital, Mary went to the Five and Dime, and bought me a few new sets of clothes, underwear, socks and a pair shoes. She stopped by Kentucky Fried Chicken on her way back and bought a bucket of chicken. She sat it, and me, in the center of the floor, and according to her, tiny little me ate two whole pieces.

I was on piece number one when Joe walked in, saying, "Mm, chicken!" as he reached toward the bucket. "You put your hand in that bucket before he's finished," Mary said, "And I promise you, you'll draw back a nub." Being the smart man that he was, he opted to leave the chicken alone.

The next morning, we were on another train, heading south. Sadly, I don't remember that ride.

Stormy Weather

5. Wonder

My grandmother, bless her heart, tended to be a little overly cautious when it came to weather. She'd survived an up close encounter with a tornado, and declaring that "it looked like a ball of fire," had vowed, from then on, to never take chances with Mother Nature. During a thunderstorm, we couldn't read a book, because it attracts lightening, listen to music, because it attracts lightening, or watch TV – there's a pattern here.

We had the lights off and basically, sat it out. This wasn't as bad as it sounds – most of my family members are extroverts, so there was always entertainment; storytelling, singing, and simply being together. But this was torture for me – not because I minded sitting still – but because whereas my grandmother was terrified of storms, I was fascinated by them.

I remember when lightning struck the big tree out front (my grandmother swears it was because my grandfather insisted on continuing to read his newspaper), everyone else retreated further into the house. Me, I stood there by the front window, enthralled by the darkened midday sky, the leaves whipping everywhere, and the sense of pregnant anticipation in the air, even inside the room.

In Alabama, storms like that could blow in in a matter of seconds. On one such afternoon, I was sitting on the front porch in my little rocker when the sky went from a cornflower blue to a charcoal grey almost immediately. I was transfixed, catching glimpses of lightening off on the horizon. I didn't even realize it had started raining. A few minutes later, the front door opened and out stepped my grandfather, coat on, and collar turned up. He took out his pipe, lit it, and as he took a pull, he looked over to the corner of the porch and froze.

There I was, staring at him as he stared at me. With a shocked look on his face, he said, "Rodney, how long have you been out here?" "Since before it started," I responded, indicating the ensuing storm. "Look at you," he said, "You're soaked to the bone." "If mamma finds out about this, we're both gonna be in a whole heap of trouble."

My eyes get big. It never occurred to me that I was doing anything wrong. He gave a deep sigh, then said, "Come on." He gathered me into his arms, snuck me back into the house and into the bathroom, stripped off my clothes, got me into the tub, and hung my wet items and his coat up to dry.

He was sitting there doing the crossword, sleeves rolled up, while I played in the bubbles until the door opened. In walked my grandmother. "How'd y'all get so wet?" she asked. I said nothing. I just looked at my grandfather. "Um, he, ah, was helping me move the wood," he said. My grandmother looked at him, then at me, and back to him.

"Uh huh," she said, in a way that communicated that she wasn't buying it. She knows he's covering for me, and I can see the tiniest

hint of a smile behind her stern look. Pulling each item of my wet clothing off the shower rod, then taking my grandfather's wet coat, she turned to him and said, "You best not be out there smoking when it's raining." "And you," she said, turning to me, "Don't be going out on that porch anymore in weather like this." We both say, "Yes ma'am," and she departs, both of us feeling like we've gotten a reprieve.

Another time, Aunt Naomi called to tell us that all the rain we'd gotten had flooded the creek and covered the entire street. She and Uncle Sid lived down at the end of the street and around the corner. For a kid with Robinson Crusoe/Swiss Family Robinson fantasies, this was the best thing ever. I wouldn't let up about seeing it.

Finally, Mary relented, saying, "Boy, you're going to drive me crazy." We got dressed in galoshes and raincoats, and walked over. And wow, she was right! It was amazing! It looked just like the Noah and the ark scene in my Children's Illustrated Bible. We made it to Aunt Naomi's house, where she and my grandmother started fussing about in the kitchen. The radio was on, and *King of the Road*, a song my granddad Olden often sang and whistled around the house, was playing. I pulled up a chair to the back window and watched the goings on outside. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

The flooded creek had turned the entire back yard into a pond. She had a large "foot tub," a metal container the size of a barrel cut in half, sitting on her back porch. Once the rain stopped, I got my uncle Sid to help me get it into the water, he held it while I hopped in, then I pushed off.

The water was only about six inches, but in my mind, it was deep as the Atlantic. Using an old fireplace broom as a paddle, I floated around out there for what felt like hours, at one point, making up my own lyrics as I sang, “King of the sea”. Every now and then, I’d look up and see Mary standing at the kitchen window, just checking on me. I’d give her a hearty wave, and she’d wave back, then I’d go back to my adventuring.

At one point, Aunt Naomi came out and called, “Hey Sailor! You hungry?” As quickly as I could, I sailed over to the back porch, and she and my grandmother handed me off half a sandwich, a few slices of apple, and two of the cookies they’d just baked.

On the way back home, I remember Mary asking me, “Did you have a good day, Baby?” I launched into all the imaginary places I’d sailed to, describing them in intricate detail. She just looked at me as if she believed every word. I remember when Pat used to mop the living room floor.

She’d always set the coffee table up on the couch and I’d imagine the sofa was my ship, out on the glassy ocean. Once she’d finished mopping, I was marooned there until it dried, which could not have suited me better. She’d tuck me in, with my books and a snack for the journey. I’d imagine a flooded world, with me sailing safely on my boat.

The day the creek flooded, I got to live out one of my greatest fantasies, and boy, was it magnificent. To this day, I recall that as one of the happiest days of my life. And I’m beyond grateful that my grandmother, despite her own fear of stormy weather, let me have the wonder of that moment.

Big Kids' School

6. Gentleness

I remember being so excited to start kindergarten. Finally, after years of wondering what it was like at the “big kids’ school” that my younger aunts and uncles attended and where my Aunt Naomi worked, I was going off to school too! Now, when everyone was up in the morning, and rushing around the house, jockeying for the bathroom and wolfing down their breakfasts, I was too. I had a satchel and everything.

Out of all of my grandmother’s kids, only Bernice and I were left handed. I became aware of being “different” in this way, my first day of school. But I didn’t mind. There were SO many people my age to play with and SO many interesting things to do. By that age, I was already a voracious and advanced reader, even though I was a bit dyslexic. We sat in those half desks, and I remember having to sit at almost a ninety-degree angle in order to use it.

I don’t remember my kindergarten teacher, but she seemed nice enough, though I do remember getting in trouble once. Our teacher kept a stapler on her desk. I didn’t know what this machine was, as I’d never seen one before. But another girl in my class knew exactly what it was, and what it did; which is why I cannot understand why she put her thumb beneath the stapler dispenser and asked me to hit it. So I tapped it. “Hit it hard,” she demanded. “OK,” I said,

thinking I was helping her with something. I hit it hard. She cried. And I got sent to the office.

Luckily, it was clear that I hadn't done it on purpose, since I started crying as well, overcome with concern for her. I was a very sensitive child – the kind that would cry if I saw someone hurt, even on TV. I found it very disturbing. I remember once, I was helping my grandmother in the kitchen. I was cracking eggs for something, a cake, I think. This was the first time I'd been given this job, and I was determined to get it right.

Biting my bottom lip in concentration, I cracked the first one on the side of the bowl, as I'd seen her do so many times. "Not like that, Baby," she said to me, quite gently, "Do it like this." I was heartbroken and tears started silently running down my cheeks, as I tried to get it right. She looked down a minute later and noticed I was crying. "Rodney, what's wrong?" she asked. "I didn't mean to do it wrong," I said, between sobs I could no longer hold back.

"Come here, Honey," she called, pulling out a chair and pulling me into her lap. "You weren't doing it wrong. It just works better if you don't crack them so hard. We don't want eggshells in our cake, do we?" I smiled, and she hugged me, though it took me a little while to stop crying. She took an egg, placed it in my hand, then wrapped her hand around it, and together, we cracked it successfully, me, smiling triumphantly.

Looking back, I can't imagine the effort it must have taken to raise such a sensitive child. But never, at any time, did Mary's kindness and tenderness toward me ever falter. She never said to me, "Big boys don't cry," or other such nonsense. And because of her, I'd

grow into a man who recognized his sensitivity, this capacity for empathy, as a strength, rather than a weakness.

Years later, when I brought her out for a visit to California, all my friends tried to get the dirt on me; stories about the trouble I got into as a child. My grandmother, notorious for using “switches” to rain down discipline on my twin uncles, Don and Ron (and making them pick their own switch), never used one on me. In fact, she never raised her voice or gave me any kind of punishment, or even a stern word. When they asked her for stories, she thought about it and said, “I don’t have any. Rodney was just never any trouble.” My friends all seemed thoroughly disappointed.

Halfway through that first year of school, I and another girl were called out of our classroom to meet with someone I now understand to be a psychologist. She asked each of us a number of questions, gave us a test, and asked us to draw a picture of a person. We did. Soon thereafter, the other girl got to return to our friends in kindergarten, whereas I was moved to first grade. So that year, I completed the first half of the year in kindergarten and the second half of the year as a first grader.

The kids were a lot bigger in first grade, and they’d been together for half a year already. But I managed to make friends and ended up with the best, prettiest, nicest teacher in the whole school – Miss Day. She helped me learn to write as a left-hander (something I would never get good at) and realizing right from the beginning that I had a deep love of learning, she did everything she could to encourage that.

Fortunately, my grandmother was a big believer in education and insisted that we all do our very best in school. It was incredibly

important for me to please her by bringing home good grades, so I worked hard to not disappoint her. She and I read together lots, and I especially liked when we read *Winnie-the-Pooh* together. I also had plenty of those Richard Scarry books, as well as Dr. Seuss; both of which I loved.

I had a little red, slatted-wood rocking chair that my grandfather made for me, the same one I'd been sitting in, on the porch, the day of the storm. Often, I'd sit, rock, and either watch *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, or read my favorite story of all time – *Miss Suzy Squirrel*. I remember Bernice coming to visit and me sitting there with my grandma on one side and my mother on the other, reading *Go, Dog. Go!* (“Hello.” “Hello.” “Do you like my hat?” “No, I do not like your hat.” “Goodbye.” “Goodbye.”), and the other new books she'd brought me.

The three of us would sit and sing, my head bobbing and legs swinging, everything from Frank Sinatra's *High Hopes* to *Shortenin' Bread*, which Mary had been singing to me for as long as I could remember. It was definitely my favorite thing to hear her sing. But if I was singing along, my favorite was probably *Oh Susanna*. I loved both the ridiculousness of the lyrics (“*It rained all night the day I left; the weather, it was dry. The sun so hot, I froze to death, Susanna don't you cry.*”), and because I “*come from Alabama*” too.

Second only to her unconditional love, the greatest gift my grandmother gave me was a spiritual foundation. Every night, before she tucked me in, I, in my train car or alphabet block or circus pajamas, we'd both get down on our knees next to my little twin bed and pray. One night, when I was about to say my traditional prayer (“Now I lay me down to sleep...”), she said, “I

think you're too big to be saying that prayer. You're a big boy now. It's time for you to learn the Lord's Prayer."

Far lengthier than the other prayer; she taught me night by night, line by line. And from that moment on, I was a "big boy". After the formal prayer, I'd talk to God about whatever I wanted. The conversation varied. Sometimes, I'd ask God's blessing on people I loved. Other times, I'd ask for help with problems and challenges. And sometimes, I'd express regret for things I'd done wrong; it never dawning on me that I was incriminating myself to Mary, who was on her knees beside me.

But no matter what, I'd always end with things I was thankful for; a habit I learned from my grandmother, who was always a big believer in gratitude. I believe that this was one of the keys to her strength of character and her relentless hope and optimism in the face of so much adversity and difficulty. I hope I inherited a fraction of her strength. For her, faith was not a doctrinal statement or set of beliefs, but a set of practices. The Golden Rule. Love one another. The Beatitudes. The Good Samaritan. She sought to live these out every day.

Given her work, she could only go to church on occasion, but always made sure that her children went. But more importantly, she expected her children to live by the same principles that directed her life. She had an incredible way of encouraging us to strive for an ideal, and at the same time, offering absolute, complete and unconditional acceptance if it wasn't met. And somehow, we all knew that both, the high standards and the unconditional embracing, were twin expressions of her care for us.

When we were both done with our prayers, I'd climb in bed, she'd tuck me in, kiss me on the forehead, and always, without fail, tell me she loved me; to which I'd sleepily respond, "I love you, too". She'd turn on the illuminated world globe I used as a nightlight (the same one that left me wondering if there was a little boy, getting tucked into his own bed, living on it, and if I, in turn, was on a globe in some little boy's bedroom), and before she was even out of the room, I was usually asleep.

Every day, Mary walked me to school and when I came out, there she'd be, just outside the fence, waiting for me. Some mornings, she wanted to go in and speak to my teacher. But on others, she would walk me to the gate and let me run from there, always with the warning, "Be careful, Rodney." "Now, give me some sugar."

I'd reach up and give her a peck on the cheek and we'd make the kiss sound as I hugged her. I know it was hard for her to watch me take off like that, especially with the tube in my chest. But she'd bite her tongue, furrowed brow, but smiling wanly, and let me go. And I'd go, roaring off across the schoolyard, satchel flapping against my back, like a man on a mission.

But I'd always stop at the front door of the building and look back to wave. And always, no matter what, she was there.

Aunt Wing

7. Honor

My grandmother grew up in Opelika, the wild, reckless and often lawless cotton town that became the county seat of the newly established Lee County, named after the famous United States Army and Confederate general. She took whatever work she could find, whether in the fields or indoors, as a “domestic.” She said that she’d had some kind of job for as long as she could remember.

As a teenager, she met and fell in love with a boy named George Ruff. George and his twin sister Georgia, were members of one of the area’s most prominent Negro families – the kind that held cotillions and expected children like George and Georgia to go to college – so I’m not sure how their and Mary’s orbits even crossed. Nevertheless, Georgia became my grandmother’s dearest, oldest friend, and George, the eventual father of my oldest uncle, George Jr., her boyfriend.

She and George Sr., who I knew later in his life as “Big Daddy,” had a second child together – my uncle Eddie Lee. But they never married, and I never understood why. That’s one of the stories she never told, which means that someone, somehow, did her wrong. My grandmother was a strict adherent to the tenet, “If you can’t say something good, don’t say anything at all,” or, as she put it, “Never

badmouth anyone; it says more about you than it does about them.” So, with Mary, stories of obvious omission spoke volumes.

I’ve heard many versions from the other family members; most of which were a variation on how his family thought that Mary, a poor orphan, was beneath them. Some relatives say he never really wanted to marry her and others say that George, who had decided to enlist and be part of the war effort, was talked out of a hasty ceremony by his mother. Either way, George went. He’d return, a decorated World War II veteran and part of history; one of the over 1.2 million African American military men who fought.

Not long after George’s deployment, his mother would ask a teenage Mary to leave the Ruff family home where she and the boys were staying. But only Mary. George’s mother insisted on keeping her grandsons; raising them to think that she was their mother, and George, their brother. I would be an adult before I realized that this was likely why Mary had gone through such effort to always make sure I knew that Bernice was my actual mother.

I remember her saying, “I’m not your mama, honey; I’m your grandma,” and me not really knowing the difference, other than there perhaps was one. She’d point out the picture of Bernice on the mantle and say, “That’s your mama, there.” I get now what she was trying to do, but to my little three-year-old mind, never having known this woman, it was like finding out that every four-legged creature is not a dog. It was purely academic.

Somehow, through all this, Georgia and my grandmother had remained best friends for life, and still were when I knew her. Georgia was, herself, a trailblazer; one of the first Negro certified actual nurses – rather than nurses’ assistants – in Alabama. But as

anyone from Jackie Robinson to Dorothy Dandridge could attest, being first came with a price. Georgia's role required endless patience, taking the worst schedules, and working tremendously long hours.

George, who as a young man, reportedly had the charm of Rhett Butler and the grace of Fred Astaire, came back from the war changed; almost childlike and never fully present again. Quite forgetful by the time I knew him, he was unlikely to find his way back from the corner store, or even remember what he'd gone there for. Unable to live on his own, his twin took him in.

Georgia, or "Aunt Wing," as we called her (which southern folk pronounced "Wang"), would drop Big Daddy off at my grandma's house on her way to work and he'd spend the day there watching TV indoors or smoking his pipe on the porch. A handsome man with a gentle, kindly and perpetually smiley demeanor, he often reminded me of what I thought Kris Kringle would be like, if one met him; and I remember wondering how, exactly, this man was related to us or what happened to him.

Nothing speaks more to Mary's inherent sense of honor than this; she'd long been happily married to my grandfather, with whom she had seven other kids. But years later, here she was taking care of this man who, whether he abandoned her or not, never saw fit to marry her, and who didn't even seem to remember her, or much of anything else upon his return.

She did all this without ever, as far as I know, saying a bad word about him; to me or anyone else. She'd done the same thing years earlier; nursing and caring for George and Georgia's then-bedridden mother, who Mary's children all called, "Grandma Mattie

Lou” – the same woman who had caused her so much pain in her early life. (Apparently, I also knew her, but other than a somewhat hazy memory of a wheezy, bedridden woman who smelled of camphor, I don’t remember her.)

Every now and then, when my grandmother needed a break from the constant churn that was her life, she and Aunt Wing would take off for a Saturday afternoon. They’d run all kinds of errands together in Aunt Wing’s car (which, to me, looked like a white Batmobile), pay household bills, go to all the discount stores where my grandma liked to shop, and get lunch somewhere along the way.

They’d come home exhausted, and with all kinds of items that needed to be put away, but what I noticed most was how, in spite of being tired, my grandma always seemed just a little more relaxed. Georgia was the closest thing Mary had to a sister, and the only person I knew of who had been in her life since her childhood. I remember going to see *The Color Purple* in college, the entire time, sitting there thinking about the parallels between Celie’s social standing and Mary’s.

I remember hearing Shug Avery in the juke joint dedicate a song just for Celie, singing: *“Sister, you’ve been on my mind. Sister, we’re two of a kind, so, sister, I’m keepin’ my eyes on you. I betcha you think I don’t know nothin’, but singin’ the blues. Oh sister, have I got news for you, I’m somethin’, I hope you think that you’re somethin’ too...”*

I immediately thought of Aunt Wing, and what a gift her sisterhood must’ve been. Seems they’d always related in that easy way of people who no longer have anything to prove to each other. I think

that friendship, that rare opportunity to just be “Mary” for a while, instead of “mamma” and “grandma”, “Ma Moore” at work and pastor’s wife at home, meant more to my grandmother than I can ever know.

I didn’t know Aunt Wing as well as my other aunts and uncles. It seemed that, except for holidays, she was mostly coming and going; dressed head to toe in hospital white. But what I do remember is that she was the kind of adult who always took me seriously. If I asked her a question, she’d sit there on the edge of the sofa, turned toward me, hands on her knees and give me her undivided attention. She was kind and generous, practical and forthright, and she did not suffer fools.

But more than anything, I knew, even as an unusually sensitive seven-year-old, that this woman was one of the few people in the entire world that my grandmother could talk to or truly count on. And even back then, I loved her for it.

Mary's Boys

8. Heritage

Of my grandmother's six boys, three were young enough to be very active in my life. As far as "big brothers" go, I couldn't have asked for better than Don, Ron and Willie James. They each cared for me deeply, and made powerful contributions to the person I am today.

Willie James, who was four years older than Bernice, was already an adult in my early childhood years. But as he still lived at home, I saw him plenty. The twins, on the other hand, were only eight years older than me, and, by the time I was in middle school, only five grades ahead of me, so we were especially close, and they took their jobs of big brothering quite seriously.

I remember one Saturday afternoon when the three of us were sitting on the living room floor, watching the 1958 film *The Defiant Ones* on television. I can still recall their shock and amazement when the two main characters got into a fistfight and Cullen, played by Sidney Poitier, backhanded Joker, played by Tony Curtis.

"Whoooa!" they both exclaimed. I had no idea why that was such a big deal. They explained that they'd never seen a black man do that to a white man before. Ron boasted, "That's what I would do!" "Yeah, right," said Don, "You'd be crying for your mama." Which, of

course, led to a wrestling match between the twins, with me pitching in to help out whoever was losing.

My Uncle Don was far more likely to explain things to me or participate in some of my cooked-up science experiments. I remember him and me listening to Jim Croce's *Bad, Bad, Leroy Brown*, which he loved, and him explaining that "no matter how bad we are, there's always someone badder." I'd always remember that.

My Uncle Ron, on the other hand, taught me to do things. He's the one who taught me how to ride a bike, under the threat of death from Mary if I got hurt. My family knew that I suffered from borderline hemophilia, but it was mostly theoretical, until the accident.

I'd apparently been playing with my wagon out in the front yard and cut my hand on a sharp edge. I didn't even realize it had happened, though I do remember being vaguely curious about the copper smell. Suddenly, my Aunt Pat, looking over and seeing me standing there in a daze, yelled, "Rodney! Oh my God!" She started screaming bloody murder for my grandma and that's the last I remember.

I woke up in the hospital and they told me that I'd need to be more careful, since my cuts didn't stop bleeding so well on their own; the way other people's did. Nevertheless, I wanted to learn to ride my bike without training wheels really, really bad, and if something was truly important to me, both the twins were, almost always, willing accomplices. Ron took it on as a challenge, and somehow, he managed to teach me how to both ride, and stop, without me ever falling.

Despite how different the twins were from each other, I shared commonalities with both of them. Don and I had similar introverted temperaments, we shared a love for electronics and even built our own radio together, and we liked going to see kung fu movies at the theater where he worked. With Ron, on the other hand, it often felt like I was following in his footsteps. We were both runners, we both moved to California early in our adulthood, we both had modest music careers, and we both had rare blood cancers.

I remember people constantly commenting about how handsome Ron was. With Mary's soulful eyes and dark complexion, if you've seen pictures of Tyson Beckford, you have a good sense of what he looked like. In high school, the girls were constantly following him around and incessantly calling our house. Ron, however, was usually out doing other things, including hanging around with a group of friends that fancied themselves the new Chi Lites.

He'd take me along and I'd sing with him and his friends, who adopted me as an unofficial member. They'd say things like, "He's going to be another Michael Jackson," but I didn't care about that. What I loved was the camaraderie. That was also the case when Uncle Willie James took me with him to his favorite bar. He asked me to sing something.

He stood me up on the bar and the bartender, initially amid protests from patrons, reached over and turned down the music, then clinked on a glass and got everyone's attention. "This little fella's gonna sing something for you," he said. Being such a shy kid, I was immensely reluctant, but my uncle said, "Go on, buddy, it's gonna be OK," so I finally started, whisper quiet, "Ben, the two of us need look no more..."

I kept my eyes fixed on the lacquered surface of the bar, unable to meet anyone's eyes. Then, I reached the bridge, "I used to say 'I' and 'me', now it's 'us', now it's 'we'," and something about the sentiment of that phrase gave me courage. I looked up into the eyes of a room full of normally gruff, brown faces, all of them soft in the bar's amber lighting.

I finished, and people started vigorously applauding. The bartender put a beer mug up on the counter and people started throwing in dollar bills – all of which, I got to keep. Something about that moment, being there with those men, would get lodged in my heart and stay with me forever.

Willie James, I think, only half-jokingly, said to me, "Don't tell mamma I took you into a bar," but of course, she found out. You'd think I would've been prepared with a decent answer for where I got such a sum of money, especially when I turned it over to her for safekeeping. "They gave it to me," was what I said. "Who gave it to you?" she asked. "Uncle Willie James' friends."

"Willie *JAMES!*" she yelled, emphasizing his middle name, the way she did when he was in trouble. He deftly deflected the conversation away from the bar, telling her how proud of me she should be, because, for the very first time, I'd sang in public, and that the guys had loved it. "Is that true, sweetheart?" she asked, proudly, and I nodded my head. She gave me a hug, and then turned to Willie James, saying, "But that's the last time you take this boy into one of your bars, you hear me?"

I loved going with Ron to practice, and singing with the guys, but one Saturday, I waited for him and he never came. He apparently was running late, so he'd gone straight from work to practice. When

I realized he wasn't coming, I walked over on my own. They'd already started, so I sat down on the steps and simply listened. When they got to *Oh, Girl*, I started softly singing along on the high harmony I'd been assigned.

They stopped. "Hey, isn't that little Rodney?" one of them asked. The door opened and there I was. Initially, the inscrutable look on Ron's face made me wonder if perhaps he didn't want me there. But then he broke into a broad smile as the guys descended on me, "giving me five" and saying how glad they were to see me.

On the way home, with his arm around my shoulder, he echoed their sentiment. "I'm really glad you came," he said, "But you can't walk over by yourself anymore," stopping and getting down on one knee so that we were at eye-level – an indicator that this was a serious conversation between brothers. "It's not safe out here. You understand?" I understood. Turns out the look I'd seen on his face was worry; concern for what could've happened to me out there alone.

Willie James and Donald would remain close, but Ronald, after graduating from high school, took off for Los Angeles, to live near his older half-brother, my Uncle Eddie Lee. We didn't hear so much from him during that time, and everyone suspected that it was because of his illness. When he came home a few years later, it was clear that he would not be with us much longer.

Mary, knowing how close I and the twins were, made sure Ron and I got to see each other before he died. I was twelve years old and by then, already living with Bernice. At the hospital, only one person at a time was allowed in to visit him. I can see him now, there in bed, in a flimsy hospital gown, halfway between lying down and

sitting up, still looking surprisingly fit. Him, as he's always done, making fun of my hair, calling it a "mop", before putting me in a fake headlock, then pulling me to his chest and holding me there, so close I can hear his heart beating.

"I love you, little man," he says, after kissing me on the head, and I tearfully tell him I love him, too. He lets me go, clears his throat, and tells me to "go get Mamma." That was the last time I'd see him. A few days later, when I heard about his passing, I'd weep profusely, and it would be weeks before the tears, always just beneath the surface, fully subsided.

Ron was the first son my grandmother had to bury, and while it was tough on everyone, it is Mary's solemn, yet potent grief, and that of Ron's twin brother, Don, that comes back to me when I recall that day. However, when I think about my Uncle Ron, it's not his death I remember, but rather his life; his 20-mile-plus runs, his infectious smile, the knowing eyes he inherited from his mom and the soaring voice he got from his dad.

Today, I can't hear *Betcha By Golly*, *Wow*, or any of those seventies soul ballads, without thinking of Ronald, and smiling. And every now and then, I find myself joining in and singing along; just like I used to with my Uncle Ron. Donald, Willie James, and Ronald are all examples of how small acts create big changes; how our circle of influence extends beyond what we do directly, to our impact on others.

I remember, in divinity school, having a moral philosophy professor who explained that spiritually, we're not just responsible for the conditions we create, but those we incite; not just the dominoes we topple, but also the ones we set in motion. He was describing this

in a negative sense, how, for example, the one who calls for the taking of a life shares culpability with he who actually takes it.

But, as with most spiritual principles, the converse is also true; that when those we've blessed, in turn, bless others, it's our own abundance, like in the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes, that's multiplied. That was the case with Mary's boys, from the three mentioned above, to Robert, and even Sid, who, though not biologically hers, she claimed with equal ferocity, and who he claimed in return.

Like ripples in the water, my uncles absorbed the lessons Mary's own life taught, then, each, in their own way, bequeathed those lessons to me. They, along with the rest of my family, are as much my heritage as the property and sums of cash left to others is theirs.

Over the years, I'd come to know, in the core of my being, how invaluable the gifts they gave me really are. And as a result, even today, I still find myself awash in gratitude for having been their chosen beneficiary; the recipient of such a powerful trust, and, at the same time, compelled by a profound sense of calling; a sacred duty to pass it, and all its attendant blessings, on.

“Your Mother’s Coming to Get You”

9. Selflessness

My grandmother was utterly dependable. If she said she’d do it, she would; come hell or high water. And she always took both my questions and my requests seriously. I remember giving her a nickel to keep for me. She put it up in one of her many purses and months later, I came back for it. She went into the closet, stepped up on a stool, and pulled down a large purse.

In that purse was a zippered compartment, and in that compartment, was a small change purse. She didn’t just give me back a nickel. She gave me the *exact same* nickel I’d given her. I know because of the date, and because it had something that looked like dried bubble gum on it.

On occasion, when she got home from work, she’d soak her feet in warm water and Epsom salts, and we’d sit there and talk about our day. Other times, I’d walk with her to the store. If she needed milk or eggs or butter, she’d always ask if I wanted to walk with her, and always, I said yes. Those were great times. We’d talk about everything, walking along, hand in hand.

I spent most afternoons with my best friends, Cameron and Kevin. Cameron and Kevin were brothers. Cameron was one year older

than me and Kevin was one year older than Cameron. We were, however, all in the same class. Kevin, due to illness, had started school a year late, and I'd been moved ahead one grade. The boys' mother had died when they were babies and their father was an officer in the military, so they were raised by their grandmother and aunt. Kind of like me.

We were fast friends from the moment we met, and despite our staggered ages, fancied ourselves a version of Abercrombie, Benjamin and Christopher; the triplets from the *Three Boys* book series (*Three Boys and a Lighthouse*, *Three Boys and a Train*, etc.) that we all loved so much. Between us, we had almost all of the *Hardy Boys* and *Encyclopedia Brown* books, and they, like me, loved those tall tales; John Henry and Pecos Bill, Johnny Appleseed and Paul Bunyan.

We were usually at their house or my house; if we were not out adventuring. Cameron came up with the idea to spell our names backwards, and so, when on our adventures, we were Yendor, Nivek and Noremac. We used their dad's old tent, set up in their attic, as our secret hideout, and we spent hours at my house, playing with my train set, all of us coming up with ideas for things we wanted to ask my granddad to add.

Kevin, who had the mind of a genius architect, came up with the most amazing concepts, usually drawn out in colored pencil. I remember their grandma showing the three of us how to take the nectar from the honeysuckle flower, and us being amazed when we tasted it.

Their dad had gotten them a little portable turntable, and every now and then, he'd send them a single in the mail wrapped in brown

paper. I remember their aunt, a ballroom dance instructor, using *Mr. Bojangles* to teach us a child's version of the waltz (I can still remember her saying, "Heel, toe, toe; heel, toe, toe"), which was fun, and how to do a basic foxtrot to *Dream a Little Dream of Me*. Other times, we'd all dance together, sillily; singing along to Carly Simon and James Taylor's fun rendition of *Mockingbird*. We loved that it was both familiar and novel at the same time.

But the song we played most was probably *Ventura Highway*, by America, though I'm not sure quite why. I think we just loved singing along with it. "What's an alligator lizard?" I remember Kevin once asking, and Cameron saying, "I don't know," before looking at me. "Me neither," I said. Kevin gave us an "oh well" shrug, then we all went right back to listening.

We also loved building things, or pretending we were pioneers, explorers, or sailors. The three of us got into making miniature rafts out of household items. There was a small water runoff that ran right through our school playground, and whenever it rained, it flowed with water. We'd bring our little homemade rafts to school and we couldn't wait until recess when we'd get to test them out. We'd compare notes on what worked and what didn't, and try again the next rainstorm.

I was down to Cameron and Kevin's house where we were playing with all our "construction" stuff – Legos, Lincoln Logs and our Tinkertoys, combining them together to make really cool things, when my grandmother phoned their grandmother, who then relayed the message that she needed me to come home. She never did this, so I immediately knew something was wrong.

I walk in, and she's sitting there in a chair in her bedroom, in the middle of the room; still wearing her apron. She has her head in her hands when I come in. I'm immediately worried. "Grandma, what's wrong?" I ask. "Nothing's wrong, Baby," she says, as she quickly removes her hands from her face. "But I've got something to tell you. Your mother's coming to get you."

My heart, a trip hammer.

"For a visit?" I ask quietly, and she shakes her head. "No, for good."

I steel myself. "When?" I ask, hoping, at least, I've got the rest of the summer. But I don't.

"Today," she says. "They're coming today."

I panic. It's as if I'm instantly transported back to my earlier experience of being taken away from my grandmother and that all the nightmares I'd had since – something I'd never talked about with anyone – were teaming up to come after me in real life. Bernice and Joe had moved back from up North, and I had a younger brother and three younger sisters. I'd met them and immediately felt this connection and desire to care for them; something I'm certain I inherited from Mary. But going there for good? I couldn't handle it.

I begged my grandmother to not let them take me. I remember being down on the floor, arms wrapped around her legs, crying hysterically as I pleaded so frantically I thought I was having a seizure. I kept begging, and she kept saying, "I can't do anything about it. I can't stop her. She's your mother." Throughout my entire life, I've only seen my grandmother cry three times. One was at Ron's funeral, then years later, after we'd buried my Granddad

Olden. The only other time was at that moment. And that stopped me cold.

For as long as I could remember, Mary, by her quiet example, had taught me about what it means to care for others; that it sometimes means making sacrifices on their behalf. It meant sitting in hospital waiting rooms while they underwent surgery, and taking a 30-hour bus ride to Hartford to bring them home.

It meant sewing up Mr. Bear when his arm started to come off, and going out in the rain so they could see a flooded creek. This is what went through my mind as I saw her there, unable, despite all she'd protected me from, to protect me from this. That's when it dawned on me – it was my turn to take up the slack and care for her. All of a sudden, I knew exactly what to do.

I stopped crying, got up, and took charge of the packing; both of us silent. Within an hour, Bernice and Joe were there. "Get your stuff," was all Joe said when they walked in the door. And within minutes, I was in the back seat, watching as we pulled away from the only home I'd ever known. My grandmother, hair disheveled and wringing her apron in her hands, was standing on the sidewalk, doing her best to not cry again, for my sake. Neither of us waved.

As the car moved down the street, I saw Cameron and Kevin in the front yard. I scrambled over to the side window and waved goodbye in a way that communicated finality. They dropped what they were doing and ran into the street; puzzled looks on their faces. They stood there in the middle of the road, and we waved sadly until they disappeared. I never even got to say goodbye.

And just like that, everything in my life was different.

PART TWO

The Heart of Resilience

10. Will

Even from the beginning, I had a genuine love for my mother; one that would only grow over time. And likewise, I have no doubt in my mind that she loved me, and that she always had; in spite of all that happened and all that she allowed to happen. We became good friends rather quickly, due in part; I'm sure, to the fact that we'd both been raised by the same woman – almost as if we were brother and sister – which is how we related.

She confided in me and I did my best to help her. I try not to judge her too harshly for the decisions she made, because I really do believe that all of us endeavor to do our best in the situations in which we find ourselves. Sometimes we don't, admittedly, but I believe that to be our aspiration. I also remind myself of how young she was; that when I was in high school, she was still in her twenties. We were essentially part of the same generation.

My mother's primary problem was, like most of us, caused by a vacancy; perhaps a sense of inadequacy, or a need to be loved and seen in a way she'd never experienced. That manifest as an addiction – not so much to alcohol, though that was a problem, and

became increasingly so over time. Her dependency was on a person – or, at least, on the way being with that person filled that vacancy. That person was Joseph Washington.

Tall and broad-shouldered, with the cocky smirk of a man who knows he's good-looking, Joe was one of the great smooth-talking con men – even with his stutter. I remember, a few years ago, watching Walton Goggins' portrayal of a roguish, but immensely likeable Lee Todd in the film, *Red Dirt*, and from Lee's "you and I both know I'm working you" grin, to the "uh, uh, uh" he'd use as filler when he's making something up out of whole cloth, to the way he used his hands when he talked – like a master magician distracting his audience, it was like he was channeling Joe Washington.

In their circles, it seemed everyone had a nickname. His was "Pretty Milk," from what I understand, because he was so "pretty," in the same way Muhammad Ali used to say, "I'm so pretty, I could slap myself," and because his skin was smooth and flawless, like milk. My mother's was "Slim", for obvious reasons. I remember the first time I heard someone refer to them as "Pretty Milk and Slim", I thought they were talking about someone else. I don't know how Bernice and Joe hooked up, but once they did, she'd stay by his side until he died, some forty years later.

Their relationship was complicated. She never shed a tear at his funeral nor afterwards, she once told me. Yet, it is obvious that they had something akin to love for each other. My grandmother, for her part, though she never said as much, had little positive regard for Joe; particularly because he treated her daughter so poorly, and me, so abusively, and that he'd had such a negative effect on her.

“Bernice was always such a good girl, growing up,” my grandmother would say, sadly. Yet, when they were hungry, she faithfully give them food, Joe included.

Mary instilled in all of her kids a deep work ethic. So, it’s not surprising that Bernice, despite drinking, was a hard worker. When I came to live with them, she was working as a short-order cook at a truck stop out on Highway 78. Joe didn’t work. He hustled, ran cons, ferried her to and from work, and hung out with his buddies. Years later, the first time I heard Tracy Chapman’s *Fast Car*, it was Bernice and Joe I thought of.

The day they picked me up, I sat perfectly still in the back seat, somehow, intuitively afraid to move. As we left my neighborhood, tears ran down my face, but I made no noise. Somehow, I anticipated that doing so meant that things would not go well with me.

Joe looked at me through the rearview mirror and saw my red eyes. “What the FUCK are you crying about?” he said, in a tone that made me jump. “If you don’t cut that shit out, I’m going to give you something to cry about!” Bernice looked back at me with a look of both silent apology and that implored me to keep quiet. Those were the only words said to me, by anyone, that entire trip.

They lived in an old house in an unincorporated area just west of Birmingham called Martin Quarters. It had indoor plumbing, but as far as modern conveniences, that was about it. They dropped me off there, and Joe turned to my siblings and said, “Say hello to your brother,” before walking out the door with Bernice trailing behind him, and saying to me over his shoulder, “Take care of those kids.”

And just like that, we were left alone; my younger brother, Joe Jr., and my three even younger sisters, Josie, Nashelia (who everyone called “Necie”) and Crystal. None of us knew where Bernice had gone, but she was there for several days. My guess is that this is why they’d suddenly come to get me; so that someone could care for the younger kids during her absence.

Living with Mary had prepared me surprisingly well for the rigors of this life. I was a passible cook, I knew rudimentary stitches for sewing things by hand, and I could manage most of the tasks associated with running a household. I didn’t really know how to comb little girls’ hair, but I learned fairly quickly. I was a decent housekeeper (as much as that house could be kept) and tried to bring some semblance of order to my siblings’ world.

Every two days or so, Joe would drop by a large can of generic brand pork-n-beans and a box of saltine crackers; then disappear again – usually without ever saying a word to us, or letting me know if/when he’d be back. There were often people out in the car; which he’d leave running with the radio blaring and smoke billowing out the windows.

On days when we had nothing to eat, I’d experiment with whatever was in the kitchen. All they had in the cabinets was flour, lard and salt, so I mixed together a variation of the pancakes I’d seen Mary make so many times. There was an apple tree outside, so we ate plenty of those, and I’d often cut them up to go in the pancakes. When the apples were eaten and the flour was gone, I started collecting leaves I knew to be edible (I had a leaf collection at my grandmother’s), and I’d boil them, similar to the way Mary cooked collard greens.

The house had no heat and there were gaps around the doors and boarded up windows, so it got quite cold. I filled the gaps as best I could, and burned wood pilfered from the collapsed house next door to keep us warm. Winters in Alabama are much colder than most people realize – especially given how we were living. Nights were not infrequently below freezing, with wind chill in the teens or even single digits. The busted windows meant that, on those nights, it was only slightly warmer inside, if at all.

I remember my first couple nights there, to make it easier to keep the fire going, I slept in the room with the heating stove, on the floor, on a pallet made of clothes. I was awakened by sudden pain; as if something was burrowing into my forehead. I startled, then heard frantic scampering. I sat there in the dark, thinking that perhaps it was a bad dream. After all, I reasoned, I was sweating profusely. I could feel it running down my face.

I got up and went into the bathroom and turned on the light. What I'd thought was sweat was actually blood. Even the rats were starving. After that incident, I started packing the stove for the night, sleeping in the lone bed with my siblings and usually getting up halfway through to add more fuel.

That same winter, one of Joe Sr.'s brothers' dogs had puppies, and since my brother Little Joe had always wanted a dog, they'd given him one. From first sight, Little Joe loved this dog more than life itself. Big Joe, bothered by the constant noise my brother and the puppy were making, made the infant dog sleep outside. When we woke up the next morning, it was frozen solid. Joe Jr. didn't stop crying for weeks. Joe Sr. at least had the dignity to look remorseful.

At some point, both Bernice and Joe came back for good, though Joe would often disappear for a few days at a time. One of his brothers told me that he had another family that he also stayed with. If that's true, I never met them.

When he was around, the relationship between my mother and him often erupted in violence. He'd slap her, pummel her with his fists, or hit her with shoes, planks, or whatever was handy; her, on the ground, pleading "Joe, don't"; hands raised, trying to shield herself from the blows. I remember being afraid that he was going to knock her into the red-glowing coal stove that kept us warm and burn her severely.

He sent her to the hospital more than once. Shortly after I arrived, he hit her with a long piece of two-by-four that had a 4-inch nail sticking out of it. The nail sank fully into her leg, and she screamed, in the agonized cry of someone who'd been seriously injured. Seeing the nail in her leg calmed him down a bit. He grabbed the plank, ripped it out, and casually tossed it in the corner. Then, he turned, walked out the front door, and drove away. She lay there on the floor, weeping and bleeding. This new life was chaotic beyond anything I'd previously been capable of even imagining.

In our house, all of us kids slept in the same bed, in order to keep warm. And I developed the ability to sleep with my ears always on high alert. I awoke at the slightest noise. One evening, Joe came in drunk and certain that my mother was cheating on him. This, from a man who had at least one other family. My mother denied it, though honestly, there was likely truth to the story. Over the years, she'd have a number of boyfriends, some of whom, like the younger brother I effectively was, I'd meet.

These guys were usually fairly good to her; giving her a little money on occasion, and at least not hitting her. I hoped that she would one day take up with one of them and get rid of Joe, but she never did. No matter what either of them did to the other (and they did a lot), they still found a way to cling to each other. Back then, I couldn't, for the life of me, understand why, so I did what I'd always done; I asked Mary.

I'd discovered that Sue Mae, Bernice's and my cousin on my granddad Olden's side, lived a few blocks away, and I'd taken to heading over and calling Mary about once a week. Her explanation was that Bernice and Joe stayed for the same reason any of us remain in a dysfunctional situation; because, despite its terribleness, we're either not ready to leave, or we don't know how to live without it. Over the years, they'd both pay a lot for what little they got. Nevertheless, they'd stick with the deal they'd struck.

This particular night, one of Joe's buddies had told him that they'd seen Bernice out with someone else. He felt humiliated, so he decided to humiliate her. He told her to pull down her panties and bend over; that he was going to "whip her ass like a child." She refused. He slapped her, and she still refused. He hit her again, and she still refused. So, he revised his tactic.

He picked up a two-by-four and headed toward the bed where we were sleeping. She tried to stop him and he said, "If you won't take your whipping, I'm just going to have to take it out on your kids. But believe you me, somebody's getting their ass whipped tonight." He raised the two-by-four over the bed, as if he was going to hit us. I wrapped my arms around my siblings, hoping to shield them from the blow.

But it never came. Bernice stopped him. “No, I’ll take it,” she said. And she did. Right there at the foot of the bed, he leaned her over the railing, panties around her knees. And he beat her with an extension cord. Still pretending to be asleep, I flinched with each blow as I silently cried for my mother and the sheer humiliation and abuse she was enduring, not six feet away from me. I listened to her cries get more pronounced with every lash, until, by the end, she was outright sobbing.

As terrible and unbearable as this was, it was in this moment that I saw the woman Mary had raised: There, in that horror, I’d see more of her mother in my mother than I’d ever seen before. Miraculously, Little Joe, Josie, Necie and Crystal, all slept through the entire thing.

Like waking up to find myself on a slave ship, in a prison cell or concentration camp, everything felt distorted and dangerous; foreign and unpredictable. And it seemed the more time I spent in that environment, the less sense anything made. But even in randomness, there are predictive patterns, if we can find them.

I thought back to the story my grandmother had told me about how she, still a girl, had moved to Birmingham – at that time, the biggest, most prejudiced city in the South, and the sheer chaos she’d faced. But she knew that a fast-growing city like that would also afford her the greatest opportunity to create for herself a future. She’d packed her few things and simply headed out, walking 120 miles from Opelika to what was known then as the Magic City.

On one of our phone calls, I asked her how she did it. She thought for a minute, then said, “Sometimes, you just got to keep going.

You ask the Good Lord for the strength to keep putting one foot in front of the other, and if you do, you'll get there.”

That insight, wherever she'd gotten it from, had enabled her to survive everything from sleeping in a lean-to and subsisting on eating scraps, to paying her bus fare through the front door, then exiting and entering through the back, to seeing “Coloreds Need Not Apply” signs everywhere when looking for work. Still, despite it all, she succeeded; creating for herself a life suffuse with love; the very life that would ultimately become such a safe haven for me.

Like Mary had before me, I would come to realize that survival meant letting go of assumptions about how the old world worked, and becoming an astute observer of the rules governing this new one; finding the patterns in the chaos. And, as she'd done, I'd resolve to, no matter what, keep going.

Those two qualities, the ability to adjust, and the drive to persevere, are at the heart of resilience, something she'd mastered long ago. And that realization led me to another important truth; that if even a fraction of Mary's fortitude resided within me, I could survive not only this place, but anything.

Crucibles

11. Humanity

*"I have my books, and my poetry to protect me. I am shielded in my armor.
Hiding in my room, safe within my womb; I touch no one and no one touches
me." – Simon and Garfunkel, I Am a Rock*

With everything that was shifting in my life, the only places that felt safe and familiar were those of books. Years earlier, Mary had gotten me a library card, which, in my new situation, quickly became one of my most important possessions. During those early weeks, I took the kids, as I'd come to think of them, to the library every day, and we'd stay there as long as we reasonably could, reading.

The library had air conditioning in the summer and heat in the winter, comfortable chairs and carpeted floors, and perhaps most importantly, it was safe. When they closed that first day, I asked the librarian, "How many books can I check out?" She told me, "Ten." I found ten books and took them home with me. I read them all that evening and into the night, then went back for ten more the next day.

For months, I was never without a book in my hand. I read from the moment I got up until I went to bed. If I had to go to the store, I read as I walked. I read while I washed the dishes, the book propped up against the sink. I immersed myself as deeply as I could in the safe

and fascinating world of those books; both as a way of keeping myself sane and because of a deep thirst to understand as much as I could.

I'd started that fall in fifth grade, and a couple months in, in a repeat of what had happened in kindergarten, I was moved up to sixth. The work was more interesting, and I was one of those strange kids who actually liked it when the teachers gave homework. But this also meant that I was two years younger than the other kids in my grade.

I remember Joe and Bernice going to see his old high school football team play their homecoming game. They took my youngest sister, Crystal, who was little more than a toddler, along, but left the rest of us home alone. A massive storm rolled in and the transformer for the entire neighborhood blew out. Evacuation warnings were issued, and Sue Mae, realizing we kids were on our own, came, along with her adult son, to fetch us.

I'd known Sue Mae, the daughter of my grandfather's brother, most of my life. But because she hated dealing with Joe, she never came by the house. This time, however, aware that we were in danger, she'd broken her rule. And boy, was I glad to see her. Josie, Necie and Joe were all inconsolable. The siren was wailing, a tree branch had fallen into the back of the house, we had no flashlight or candles, and the batteries in my emergency radio had long lost their charge.

Still, I remember being afraid because Joe had said, "Don't leave the house." But Sue Mae said, "Don't worry, I'm sure he didn't mean for y'all to stay here in weather like this." We went, and she fed us dinner. Late that night, around one in the morning, I remember

being awakened abruptly as Joe pulled me out of bed by my feet and onto the floor. "Get the fuck up!" he said.

My mother was hurriedly waking up the other three kids and shooing us out into the car. It was still raining. Sue Mae was following along, trying to explain to Joe that she'd come to get us and that I was hesitant to leave, per his orders, but he didn't listen. "I told him to do something, and he disobeyed me," he said.

When we got home, he took a long leather belt that had a big cowboy buckle, wrapped the notched end around his fist and hit me several times with the buckle end. On one swing, the buckle caught me in the face; busting my lip, bloodying my nose and knocking out a tooth. My mother stood on helplessly, wringing her hands. She once said something, and he said, "Shut up, or you're next." This would be the first of three seminal experiences that would come to define my life in that household.

From the beginning, I tried my best to shield my younger sisters and brother from the worst of that life, but only with modest and occasional success. To be sure, Little Joe and the girls, in their own right, endured far more than any child ever should. But the childhood event that scarred them most was not done to them directly; it was done to me. Joe tried to hang me, and forced them to watch. He said I thought I was too good for them because I wasn't a "Washington."

So, first, he locked me in a closet; Bernice sneaking me food and water once a day for two days. Then, he made me stand on a crumbling brick pillar in a dark basement, flooded with two feet of stagnant water; a mosquito breeding ground. I got hundreds of mosquito bites everywhere – eyelids, inside my nose, in my ears.

If I opened my mouth, they flew in. There, balancing on this pillar in the dark, I started to panic. I went somewhere else; a faraway place in my mind, and nearly didn't come back.

When he finally brought me up, it was the same way I'd gotten down there; Little Joe and Josie extending a two-by-eight board from the lowest step not submerged in algae-covered water, out to the pillar on which I was standing. Upstairs, Joe had attached a rope to the light fixture, formed into a noose. He stood me in a chair and slipped the noose around my neck; me, in a fog. He called the girls and Joe Jr. in and said, "Say goodbye to your brother."

They started crying and pleading, saying, "Daddy, don't do this." I remember my mother saying, "Joe, oh my God, please don't, I'm begging you." But he wouldn't listen. "This is your last chance," he said. "Either say goodbye or don't." I watched, as, down the line, my siblings said, "Goodbye Rodney," through their tears, and like it was happening to someone else, I saw Joe kick the chair out from under me.

I hung suspended for a few seconds, before suddenly falling to the ground. The house, one step away from condemnation, couldn't take the strain. The light fixture, and the crossbeam holding it, both fell through the ceiling. For months, I had rope burns around my neck, but I survived. For the rest of our lives, if you'd asked my siblings about the most traumatic event they'd ever experienced, chances are, this is the story they would tell you. The murder we witnessed would be a close second.

Across the street from where we lived was a gambling house of some sort. I'd never been in it, but people were there all times of night, and Joe went over on occasion. One morning, two men got

into an argument out in the street; one of them accusing the other of cheating at cards. The guy doing the accusing was Jimmy Seawright, a member of one of Birmingham's prominent African American families; known for taking the law into their own hands and incurring little in the way of consequences.

I don't remember the name of the other man, but the owner of the gambling house was trying desperately to defuse the situation. Jimmy Seawright left abruptly, but the man stayed around, despite strong encouragement from the host to leave; the man not aware of the danger he was in.

Finally, intoxicated, and full of braggadocio, he strutted out to his car; trash-talking the whole way. He was parked literally right in front of our house, and since I was in the front yard, I could see everything. He opened the car door and got in, pushing in the clutch and putting the manual gear shift in neutral to start the engine. He had not yet shut the car door when a big white Cadillac, immaculately shined, drove up from the opposite direction and blocked him in.

It was Jimmy's uncle, who got out, put a 10-gallon hat on his head, and pulled out a shotgun. At the same time, Jimmy walked up the hill from the other direction, holstered pistols on each hip, like a guy out of a spaghetti western. They both advanced on the man in the car, who went from silly to deathly serious, and who started trying to reason with them. Jimmy walked up to the man's car, casually stuck his pistol in the window, and pulled the trigger; never breaking his stride.

Blood and brain matter exploded against the inside of the windshield, his body slumped over the steering wheel, and as his

foot left the brake, his car rolled into our front yard. He fell out of the open door, dead before he hit the ground. Jimmy continued walking as if nothing had happened; past his uncle's car and around the bend, out of sight. Without a word, his uncle climbed back in his car and drove off in the direction from which Jimmy had come.

I, along with my siblings who had been playing in the yard, stood there watching this whole thing. I found myself wondering if this dying man was someone's husband or dad, and trying to fathom a world where things like this happened in real life. I remember hurriedly escorting everyone inside, and me waiting for the sirens and flashing lights that would never come. It was the man's brother who finally came and drove him, and the car, away. This was my new life.

Before coming to that house, I'd never been required to, in the least bit, harden myself. Mary had seen to that. But now, my very survival hinged on my ability to master the same balancing act she'd perfected so early in life: I needed to become tough enough to not break under the strain of this place where I was now imprisoned, while not becoming so hardened that the human misery of others no longer affected me. Even back then, something inside me understood that our humanity was intrinsically tied to our capacity for empathy. So, I let myself cry on behalf of the man in the car and for his family. And as I did, even then, I knew I was fortunate that I could.

Years later, I'd hear the Indigo Girls sing, "*So, we must love while these moments are still called 'today'; take part in the pain of this passion play. Stretching our youth as we must. Until we are ashes*"

to dust. Until time makes history of us.” And when I did, those memories – reminders that when it’s toughest to hold onto our ability to love is also when we must – would spring to mind.

Because it was there, in that place, that I’d learn something powerful: that it’s through trials such as these that we build vast, hidden reserves of strength. But not the so-called strength that Joe, in his cruelty and Jimmy, in the casually taking of a life, sought to embody. This was the kind that moves mountains, ends wars, and restores our souls; the kind evident in Mary’s every action; in the depth of her humanity.

On one occasion, after telling her about the murder, and asking her how people could do such things, she told me the story of Joseph from the book of Genesis, and how he’d said to his brothers, the same ones who’d sold him into slavery, “What you intended for evil, God used for good.” She went on to explain how she’d repeatedly seen that spiritual dynamic play out in her own life, and I’d think back on other stories she’d told me about her own early years.

I’d imagine going through similar things, only in an era where women were routinely abused, when the rights of minorities were casually violated, and where, instead of the loving home I’d grown up in, I’d been abandoned and on my own. I remember hearing that quip about how Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did, but backwards, and in heels. If you add in “blindfolded”, that felt like an appropriate analogy for what Mary had gone through, compared to me.

And yet, she’d come through it all, and in the process, become the kind, generous, wonderful woman I knew; the one who’d talked to me every day, for six months, through hospital glass, who’d

changed the bedclothes of the woman who'd taken her first two children from her, and who, despite everything, still managed to see the best in everyone she met.

How she'd performed that feat, I had no idea. She'd gone in, coal, and come out, diamond. And that, over time, would become my new goal; not just to survive, but to emerge from my own crucible with an intact heart – one capable of love and of changing the world – just as Mary, long ago, had emerged from hers.

The Man Without Fear

12. Courage

Six months into my time at the Washingtons, we move to a new place. But besides geography, little else changed. An elderly man down the street, aware of some of what went on in the house where I lived, sort of befriended me. One day, I saw him and he gave me a stack of comics. He pointed out one in particular for me to read – Daredevil. He said, “This guy is special. I think you’ll like him.” And he was right; the connection was visceral.

Daredevil was a blind superhero; something that, for someone who had worn glasses all his life, resonated with me immediately. As a young, not much older than me, reddish haired (as was I – some kids at this new school had even taken to calling me “Ronald McDonald because of my wild, reddish-brown Einstein hair and caramel complexion), pre-teen, Matt Murdock’s entire world was upended when, in an accident where he saved an old man from an out-of-control truck, he was blinded.

As often happens in comic books, the accident sprayed him with radioactive chemicals. He lost his sight, but his other senses were superhumanly enhanced to compensate. The fact that he got his powers by sacrificing his own safety to save someone, stirred something deep within me.

Now, as an adult, Matt could hear through walls, read newsprint with his fingertips, and he developed a “radar sense” that allowed him to be aware of all that was happening around him at once. But most importantly, Daredevil was called *The Man Without Fear* – a reputation that he earned every day, as he went up against foes both bigger and stronger than him. And prevailing. I so wanted to be him.

In this new place, I knew no one who had a phone, so as often as I could, I’d use the public one down the street and call Mary, just to hear her voice. She’d always ask how I was making out, and I’d always tell her the same thing – fine. One time, I was standing outside the convenience store, talking to her when I hear, “Hang up that phone.”

“I gotta go, Grandma,” I say. Worried, she starts asking, “Rodney? What’s wrong? Rodney?” I say again, “Nothing. I gotta go. I’ll call you later, OK?” She tries to say something else, but Joe reaches over, snatches the receiver out of my hand and slams it down. “What did you tell her?” he demands. “Nothing,” I say. He looks at me, as if to see if I’m lying. Then he says, “Good. Neither of you want to fuck with me, got that?”

That was all he needed to say, in terms of a threat. I still had vivid memories of the night he’d beaten a man to death with a lead pipe. Joe and this man got into a nonsensical altercation at a private club. The man bested Joe in a fight, so Joe waited outside the club until the man came out, hours later. He ambushed him, bashing the man’s skull in and taking off.

When he came home, he was covered in blood, where it shot up the inside of the pipe and all over his clothes. He was panicked,

thinking that the police were on to him, and he had me burn the clothes in the coal stove. So, when he said, "Neither of you want to fuck with me," this image came to mind. I decided that it was better to just not call Mary again, which, in hindsight, was a mistake. She got so worried that she traveled out to our house, along with my four uncles, Ron, Don, Robert and Willie James.

She showed up and Joe was lying on the couch, watching the football game. She knocked on the door and walked in before being invited. "What do you want?" Joe asked, dismissively. "Where's Rodney?" she demanded. "Hell if I know," he responded, getting up, then maneuvering around her to turn up the television, before plopping back down. Meanwhile, I was in the other room, listening to this whole thing. Mary said to one of my uncles, "Go find Rodney." She walked over and turned off the TV, then came and stood in front of Joe.

"Now, you listen to me," she tells him, in that very quiet, gravely, calm-before-the-storm voice of hers. "I may not be able to do anything about him being here, if my fool of a daughter insists on staying with your no-good ass, but if *ANYTHING* happens to that boy, so help me God, you won't be long for this world." There's an edge in her voice that I'd never heard before, nor since, and that would be the only time I'd ever hear the words "no-good ass" come out of her mouth.

Together, they have their intended effect. Joe, for all his threats and bluster, doesn't say a single word. "And one more thing – you hang up the phone in my face again and see what happens to you. Now, I *KNOW* your mama raised you better than that. Didn't she?" And I hear a halfhearted "Yes ma'am" from the other room.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen him humbled. Just weeks prior, his oldest brother, Amos Jr., stopped by while visiting from Connecticut. Joe got angry at Bernice for some reason and, after too much wine, lit into her. Frantically trying to fight back, she inadvertently hit him in the mouth – something he had done to her often, on purpose. He went into a rage and again, hit her with a plank that had a rusty nail in it. Only this time, it sank into her skull, rather than her leg.

His brother tried to intervene, knowing that he needed to get Bernice to the hospital. Joe refused to let him take her and attacked his brother, who in turn, punched him in the gut so hard that Joe doubled over, sounding as if he was about to vomit. Joe then stood up again, rearing his fist back, so Amos hit him again – twice – in the face with a quick right/left cross combination. Joe stood there, swaying on his feet, and then fell backwards like a domino. Out cold. Amos then gathered Bernice into the car, and they sped off, gravel spraying.

It was the strangest silence afterward. Our little street, which dead-ended at an abandoned slag dump, had no other traffic whatsoever. I could hear the wind rustling the leaves, with Joe lying face down in the road where he fell. I stood there silently, with Don's words about Bad, Bad Leroy Brown (who, like Joe, "stood about six-foot-four"), and how his fate was a cautionary tale, echoing through my mind.

I then herded the kids back into the house and made dinner. Joe came to a while later. He staggered through the door, hungover but otherwise acting as if none of that day's events had occurred. Now,

here we were again, and Joe had the opportunity to do things differently than he'd done with Amos.

For me, watching my dear old Mary, this tiny, soft-spoken speck of a woman, transform into this lioness, this Harriet Tubman, this Patton, so full of power, righteous fury, and fearlessness, taught me something immeasurably important. I realized that whether I was here or there, near or far, one thing I'd never be was alone.

I understood, with absolute certainty, that Mary would, if need be, take on the entire world on my behalf. And in such a confrontation, my money was on her. That experience reinforced three valuable lessons that I'd already learned:

1. *A smaller person can most definitely prevail against a bigger person,*
2. *Some things were truly worth fighting for, and*
3. *Mary Moore was a force to be reckoned with.*

The first two were the lessons I'd seen played out in everything from the Civil Rights movement to my Daredevil comic books, and the third was just "gospel truth," as they'd say back home.

Life itself had given Mary an intimate understanding of tyrants; whether of the racial or sexual, economic or social variety. And somehow, without anyone to affirm her worth as she'd done mine, she'd learned to do that for herself. She'd long determined that no man was going to demean her, break her, or strip her of her dignity. And I vowed, then and there, to learn from her example.

Regarding Joe, I wish I could say that he suddenly became a new man, but he didn't; the excessiveness of his antics would definitely

diminish, but not so much the nature of them. But one thing he never did again was try to stop me from talking to my grandmother.

In the end, however, what mattered most was not what was happening with him, but with me. Because I now knew the secret of men like him – their greatest weapons were fear and intimidation. And like my favorite superhero, I was no longer afraid.

Make Me Wanna Holler

13. Forgiveness

People have often asked me why Joe was such an angry and violent young man; something I don't know the full answer to. But I do know one thing; while his actions were extreme, the anger that fueled him was not unique. I try to understand what it must have been like to have grown up at the time that he and so many other black-identifying men his age did. After centuries of oppression, African Americans were making advances.

But not without costs. The burden of nonviolence must have been almost unbearable, especially when those doing the oppressing did not feel constrained by the same rules. This was a generation that was demeaned, denied, and denigrated in almost every way imaginable; they suffered the backlash of the same Civil Rights movement they were at the core of.

Unbelievably, Joe and Bernice, and their siblings and friends were among the youth who marched in the Children's Crusade in Birmingham, and who were arrested alongside Martin Luther King. They were kids, and like people who've gone to war, they'd carry the trauma of those experiences with them forever. Joe and his friends became Black Panthers in Detroit. Others joined the Nation of Islam. Like live wires, they were energy looking for an outlet.

It is no wonder that both Black Power and Black Pride became rallying cries, and songs like the Staple Singers' *I'll Take You There* ("Ain't no smiling faces," Mavis sang, "No lying to the races"), resonated so greatly, because healthy pride and faith that the country they loved, loved them back, was immensely lacking.

Joe, and many other guys like him, suffered from the same conditions that the Temptations, in *Ball of Confusion*, sang about ("And the band played on.") They knew they weren't "boys" to be talked down to by "white guys half their age", but they lived in a society that refused to acknowledge them as, or allow them to be, men.

I also forget how young he was. Two years older than Bernice, he was barely legal in the early 70s, when, like many others, he fancied himself "Super Fly." I remember seeing adults dressed to go out for the evening; afros puffed out and wearing their fur-lined ankle-length coats, leather platform boots, hoop earrings, gold chains and bell-bottomed "jumpsuits."

Super Fly, an independently released film about the reality of black life in the late 60s and early 70s, centered around the story of Youngblood Priest, a drug dealer who wants out of the underworld drug business, but who has to contend with the myriad forces that make that all but impossible. Released in 1972, the movie was both criticized for glorifying drug dealers and praised as a subtle critique of the civil rights movement's failure to provide better economic opportunities for black America.

Rather than prosperity, or the dawning of a new era, a decade after sit-ins, the March on Washington and the passage of landmark legislation, everywhere one looked – from housing to jobs, from

education to community cohesion – things were appreciably worse; caught in a cycle not unlike the one described in Elvis Presley's *In the Ghetto*. The film's portrayal of a community where, for males, selling drugs was the only viable vocation, gave voice to the prevailing sentiment that the dream of the movement was far from realized.

And because of Super Fly, "Youngblood," a term applied to ambitious young guys, entered popular vernacular. The 70s brought with it a generation of angry black men in their twenties and thirties, demanding change, but contending with dreams that had been shattered by the same bullet that killed Martin. They, like Howard Beale, in the 1976 film, *Network*, wanted to shout:

"Well, I'm not gonna leave you alone. I want you to get MAD! I don't want you to protest. I don't want you to riot – I don't want you to write to your congressman, because I wouldn't know what to tell you to write. I don't know what to do about the depression and the inflation and the Russians and the crime in the street. All I know is that first you've got to get mad. You've got to say: 'I'm a human being, god-dammit! My life has value!' So, I want you to get up now. I want all of you to get up out of your chairs. I want you to get up right now and go to the window. Open it, and stick your head out, and yell: 'I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not gonna take this anymore!'"

My grandfather Olden was of the Greatest Generation. He lived in a world where a Negro man stepped off the sidewalk into the muddy gutter, hat off in the rain, to allow a white-identifying couple to pass. I remember hearing an Anglo kid, not much older than me; address my grandfather simply as "Olden", but him calling him "Mr. Bobby". I'm ashamed to admit that I harbored disappointment in him, this man I loved dearly, for these actions.

I hated seeing him prostrate himself, hated seeing his painstakingly shined shoes and immaculately creased trousers ruined by what these people required of him. But that was the epitome of naivete. I had no idea what the world was like for him; the time he'd grown up in. His reality was one in which, with a single word, a white-identifying man could get you fired from your job and blacklisted from work, or evicted from your home.

He could have you thrown in jail. Or, if you owned your home, he and his white-sheeted friends could show up at night and set it on fire, or drag you out and hang you in your own tree. He'd seen these things. Once I understood the great strain he was under as a colored man in his time, and the lengths to which he went to protect and care for his family, I was humbled.

And that was before I found out that he was one of the many African American men who'd reported for the draft in WWII, but who were rejected due to racial quotas, or that, two decades later, he'd been a quiet organizer of Birmingham's Civil Rights campaign. I remember the afternoon of the "gutter incident," questioning him. "Shoes can be shined, son," he said, kindly, with his hand on my shoulder; as if he'd revealed a great life secret. And in a sense, he had. There's something important about choosing one's battles.

Joe's generation saw their own injustices, but unlike those who preceded them, Martin, Rosa, and others of the Silent Generation, they refused to keep quiet. They found it increasingly difficult to stand in civil disobedience without the violence perpetrated against them begetting violence. Lifetimes of oppression, with no carriage of justice, had turned them into emotional powder kegs, determined not to endure one more bit.

The feeling was, “*They don’t respect us and they are not afraid of us. We can’t make them respect us, but we can damned sure make them afraid.*” In their minds, a *MAN* would never step off the sidewalk into the gutter for *anybody*. They were committed to not only staying on the sidewalk, but to creating a world where when people saw them, others were the ones who moved.

They decided they were done “taking shit from the man”, and they vowed to never bend their necks again. And in this sense, they were lock-step with their Baby Boomer sisters and brothers – of all racial, cultural and ethnic backgrounds – from Vietnam War protestors, to gay pride, to women’s lib; from the Chinese Red Guard, to the Puerto Rican Young Lords, to the Appalachian Young Patriots.

But perhaps no one captured this generation’s anguish better than Marvin Gaye, in his song, *Inner City Blues: “Inflation, no chance, to increase, finance. Bills pile up, sky high; send that boy off, to die. Oh, make me wanna holler, the way they do my life.”* Joe lacked the skills to properly address his legitimate anger, fear, and frustration in ways beyond violence. And again, in this, he wasn’t unique. There were thousands of guys like him around. He was worse than many, but by no means, all.

I do know that later in his life, almost two decades before his death, he called me up out of the blue to “make amends.” He was in prison at the time, was in AA and working his “ninth step.” He apologized, without excuse or condition, for the many things he’d done to me and the pain he’d caused me in my life.

He explained that he was seeing a psychiatrist, was on medication, and that for the first time, he felt like he was in control of himself. I

doubt if I've ever been more surprised. Once I got over the shock, I let him know that I appreciated the call, and acknowledged that it must have taken real courage. In fact, this was probably the most courageous thing I'd ever seen him do.

He agreed that doing this was indeed difficult and admitted that his list of people that he had wronged was quite long. He asked for my forgiveness and I told him that I'd already done so, long before he'd ever decided to call, but that it still meant something that he'd asked. My entire adult life, Mary had continued to tell me, "You have to forgive him, Rodney, for your own sake." Until I finally had.

He said to me, "You know when I truly started respecting you?" "It was when you were 13 years old and you came to me and said, 'I need to ask you to never hit my mother again.'" "My first thought was, 'Who the hell does this kid think he is,'" he said. "But then I thought, 'Good for him.' That took balls."

"And if some dude was hitting on my mama," he continued, "He'd have gone to sleep one night and not woke up the next morning." All of a sudden, silence. "There was one time I came close," I finally admitted. "Yeah, I'm not surprised," he replied after a pause.

I had one more thing I needed to clarify before we ended. "As much as I appreciate this conversation, Joe, these are the most words we've ever said to each other and I don't think it benefits either of us to pretend we have a better history than we do." "I understand," he said. "And all I want is for things to be good enough between us that if we're ever at the same family gathering, we can do that without a problem. Does that work for you?" I told him it did.

We said our goodbyes, and I saw him twice more; years later, when I accompanied Mary back to Alabama after her California visit, and still later, when I'd routed my travel through town just to check on her. While in Birmingham for the latter, I treated him and Bernice to dinner and we had the most enjoyable, comfortable conversation the three of us have ever had.

I was surprised to discover that both of them had given up alcohol, and in my mother's eyes, I could, once again, see vestiges of the girl she'd once been. Joe, functionally illiterate when he'd gone into prison, was, by the time he left, reading everything from 1984 to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The three of us, including Bernice, who, like me, had always been an avid reader, had a wonderful conversation about both.

Joe's previous inability to read was just one of many things that, by getting to a point where he could admit what he'd tried all his life to hide, he was able to actually get past. But, by far, the most pivotal turning point in Joe's life was his realization that he, along with five of his seven brothers (they had no sisters), all suffered from highly heritable psychiatric disorders. Turns out, this was the root cause of so much of his violence and irrationality.

Out in front of the restaurant that evening, as we were saying goodbye, I was surprised and touched when he, while shaking my hand, grabbed my shoulder and pulled me into a half-hug, saying, in my ear, "Knowing you was the closest I've ever come to greatness." That would be the last thing he'd say to me. He'd die seven years later, and upon his passing, I'd remember a conversation I had long ago with Mary. I'd asked her how she'd forgiven people who'd treated her badly, and she said, she'd

learned to come up with one good memory of them and to hold on to that.

At her insistence, I'd relayed to her a couple good memories I had of Joe, like how despite his psychiatric lapses, he never once verbally tore me down, or doubted that I was going to be "somebody". In fact, he'd often tell his friends that I was a genius, and that, while he couldn't "carry a tune in a bucket," that I could "sing like a bird."

Back when I was making tips, Bernice would often come pick me up on Saturday evenings, since I'd worked twelve hours. One of the few jobs I remember Joe having back then was that of cab driver. This particular evening, it was he who had shown up to get me, in his cab. I wasn't sure what to do, so I started to open the back door, and he said, "You can sit up here."

I looked at him questioningly, then hopped in, and off we went. Minnie Riperton's *Lovin' You* was playing on the radio, and when she got to the part where she melodized in the whistle register, Joe turned to me playfully, and said, "Bet you can't sing *that*, can you?" I looked up at him and said, "I always thought she was whistling."

"No," he reflected, almost reverently, "She's singing. That's why they call her The Nightingale." I remember the soft smile on his face, like he was sharing a secret with me, and as I thought on his passing, it was that smile that came back to me. Looking back, it is amazing to me that there was such redemption to be found even here. And if Joe was right – if there is indeed any greatness within me at all – it is due, in large part, to the character cultivation and example of, and constant outright harassment by, one Mary Moore.

EZ Supermarket

14. Conscience

“To find a job is like a haystack needle; cause where he lives, they don’t use Colored people – living just enough, just enough for the city.” – Stevie Wonder, Living for the City

When school let out after my first year in the Washington household, I’d completed my combined fifth/sixth-grade year, and at ten years old, would be a full two years younger than the other seventh graders. That summer, my mother returned from a lengthy stay in the hospital after Joe’s earlier assault with the two-by-four. She’d mostly recover, but the damage caused by the nail in her head would, many years later, trigger debilitating seizures.

We, meanwhile, had been without her income for so long that we were evicted a second time, our possessions put out; heaped in piles, on the street. Saying nothing, Bernice and Joe loaded us into the car and drove off, not even going through the items. Joe lit a cigarette and flicked it onto one of the piles. I saw it burst into flame as we drove away. The hardest thing about this was the collection of comic books the man who introduced me to Daredevil had given me. But even this, I was able to let go – by then, I was pretty adept at starting over.

The new house was a “shotgun” house, a three-room tenement-style home that proliferated during the heyday of Birmingham’s

steel industry, and called that because they were so small, one could stick the barrel out the back door and still see the handle out the front, or fire one through the front door and out the back without hitting anything. In this one, Bernice and Joe slept in the living room, with the rest of us in the bedroom. The third room was the kitchen.

In addition to the seven of us, Mona and her two young kids moved in that same day. Mona, a short puffy cheeked woman with a gregarious laugh and an infectious sense of humor, brought a levity to that situation that I would have previously thought impossible.

I didn't quite understand the arrangement, and she and Joe might have been romantically involved. At any rate, he was in a better mood with her around, which made life better for all of us; even Bernice. Mona and her two girls slept in a rollaway bed in the middle room with us.

That first day, Joe dropped us off and, as usual, disappeared. My mother was still recovering, there was no money and there was nothing at all in the kitchen to eat. Mary, who had taught us all the value of working hard, had also instilled that trait in me. So, just as she had done when she was around my age, I decided to take control of my situation. I kept remembering one of her sayings, "Where there's a will, there's a way." I would say it over and over again like a mantra. I wasn't sure how much will I actually had, but I figured it was at least enough to get started.

I left home, wandering around the neighborhood, looking for some kind of work to do, which is how I'd earned the change I'd used at the previous house to call Mary. Nothing. It got late, and as I was returning home, I passed a store – EZ Supermarket – about six

blocks from where we now lived. The bread company had already dropped off the fresh bread to be sold the next morning and had positioned it on two rolling racks, sequestered in the breezeway. I stole two loaves of this bread and brought it home for us to eat. That night, we had a dinner of bread and water.

I woke up feeling “off”; unable to quiet the uneasiness in my stomach. It was as if Mary’s voice was in my head saying, “I didn’t raise you to be no thief.” As legitimate as it was to do that the night prior, I thought back to how she’d always said that lives aren’t ruined all at once, but one decision at a time, and that “just one more time” was, almost always, once too many.

It was important to me to make this right, so I went back to the store and asked to speak to the store owner, a balding, portly Italian man named Vincent Rosatta. He’d turn out to be one of the kindest people I’d ever meet, but given his gruff demeanor, I had no way of knowing that at the time. I thought I was going to jail. I told him, “Last night, I stole two loaves of your bread. I don’t have the money to reimburse you, but if you’ll let me work for you today, you can keep the money you would have paid me to pay for the bread.” He agreed, and I worked.

At the end of the day, I walked out of the store, not sure how we were going to eat that evening. “Hey kid,” Mr. Rosatta yelled, “Get back over here.” And miraculously, he paid me. Then he said, “Come back tomorrow and you’ve got a job.” Looking back on it, that was the day I became an adult. And none of that would have happened without Mary’s prevailing influence.

The job at EZ Supermarket paid me ten dollars a week, which, if spent well, was enough to buy food for the family each day. But

that was about all I had money for. My work consisted of bringing in the shopping carts from the parking lot, sweeping and mopping, and sometimes, helping Jim McKenzie, the manager in charge of dry goods, stock shelves.

Jim was a great guy, patient, earnest and kind. With his reddish blond hair parted on the side and close-cropped around the edges, and a perpetual smile, he reminded me of Richie Cunningham from *Happy Days*. Jim always made me feel like an equal, and was probably my first true friend in this brave new world in which I now lived. He took a little heat from some of the other guys, all adults and all white-identifying, for sitting with me on lunch breaks. "Why do you let that little colored kid hang around you all the time?" they'd ask. He'd often have his wife pack an extra sandwich for me, knowing I wouldn't have one.

I was working with Jim on aisle two when Joe walked in. He wanted money, but I had none to give him. He started yelling, and Jim stepped in between us. Joe trying to reach around Jim to grab me, inadvertently knocked over one of those towering displays of cans, and Mr. Rosatta called the police. Joe fled before they arrived, and Mr. Rosatta informed me that unfortunately, he'd have to let me go.

With the winter coming on, I needed some way to make money. I remembered that often, when I helped people take their groceries to the car, they'd give me a small tip. I decided to go to the larger supermarket about two miles away and try the same thing. I'd wait outside and when people came out the front door, I'd offer to push their cart to the car and load their groceries.

As the weather got colder, business got better, with people taking advantage of my services to get out of the cold and get the heaters

going in their cars as quickly as possible. I'd use socks, covered by plastic bags on each hand to keep them at least somewhat warm; a trick my friend Raymond, a homeless Vietnam vet, taught me. This worked better than any gloves I could afford. Customers, from the warmth of their cars, would then usually hand me a tip through the window; most likely, a quarter, rarely, a dime, and on occasion, a dollar.

If I got started early (by 9 am) and stayed late (till 9 pm), I could make \$10-14 in a single day. I'd go after school from 4 to 10, making about \$7 per day. The work was hard and the hours long, but with that kind of money, I could do far more than buy food; I could buy shoes for Necie, a new coat for Josie, get Crystal's medicine, and I could provide the money my brother Joe needed so that he could go on the school trip to Opryland. I could buy bar soap and little things needed around the house. I could even pay the electric bill.

We went from buying food every evening to shopping once a week; which saved money, with me planning meals, as I'd long seen Mary do. My mother would often walk with me to the grocery store, as I'd done with my grandmother when I was younger. This gave us lots of uninterrupted time to talk, which is when I started encouraging her to go back to school. She did. Though she'd dropped out in ninth grade, she completed her GED on the first try, then enrolled at Lawson State Junior College.

My second year of high school, she got accepted to University of Alabama in Birmingham (UAB). Together, we'd ride the 5:50am, number 39 bus to downtown Birmingham each morning, then transfer from there. At home, I managed family chores each night

ME AND MARY

so she could take on a heavier course load. She was on track to graduate college at the same time I was graduating high school, and to this day, is one test away from becoming a licensed dietitian. She was the first of my grandmother's clan to complete this level of schooling.

All of this was made possible through people like Mr. Rosatta, who took a chance on me, Jim, who cared for me, and the people who, by letting me take care of their groceries, allowed me to make a living. But none of that would have happened without Mary, who, even now, continues to be my voice of conscience; just as she was back then.

Stanley
15. Diligence

The school I'd gone to for fifth/sixth grade ended at grade six and I started a new, larger school for junior high. At the time, I was about 4'9" – smaller than any student – boy or girl – in the entire school. Worse, I couldn't hit a baseball for the life of me; though lord knows, I tried. Strikeout after strikeout, it would be high school before anyone noticed that I was left-handed and suggested that I line up on the other side of the plate. I got a hit – a double – and stood there utterly dumbfounded that I'd connected with the ball, while my team frantically yelled, "Run! Run!"

Things seemed to click after that, and I'd discover to everyone's surprise, especially my own, that I was actually a decent athlete. In seventh grade, however, I played sports worse than the kids in a Disney movie – *before* their cynical, but ultimately inspiring coach showed up.

And worst of all, due to my tendency to spend every free minute in the library, I was labeled "the smart kid." Everywhere I went, I carried my precious books, in case I got a free moment to read. I'm certain that there were other kids smarter than me, but they hid it well and were determined to not be outed.

But me, in this new bizarro world where trying hard at school was now a bad thing, carrying my books was one of the most courageous things I'd ever do. Add to this, being quiet and sensitive, liking comic books and trains, wearing glasses, braces and having reddish brown hair that, try as I might, was more Jewfro than Afro, and it is no surprise that few kids welcomed the new boy. Except Stanley.

In many ways, my archetypal opposite, Stanley was a great athlete, but struggled in the classroom. My first day at school, the guys routinely divided into teams for basketball and in the normal course of things, I was allocated to a side. Given that it was my first time to ever play, I was predictably just short of awful.

After the game, some of the other guys started to make fun, but it was Stanley who said, "He wasn't that bad; especially for his first time." "And besides," he said, "He was making some good strings." The other guys begrudgingly agreed, and I said nothing – since I didn't even know what "strings" were. Stanley and I sort of became friends after that.

That year, the school instituted standardized testing as a means of determining which students could advance to the next grade. They gave the preliminary test right before Christmas and the results were alarming; 3 out of 4 seventh graders failed. Stanley was among them. I was surprised when, on the last day before our Christmas break, he pulled me aside and divulged his scores.

It was general knowledge that a lot of kids had failed, but most people acted as if they were in the group that passed. The bar for passing was a score of at least 80 out of 100. Stanley scored a 34. He then surprised me further by asking if I'd help him. I was already

working, so the only time I had available was on weekends before work. We agreed to start meeting on my back porch Saturday mornings at seven.

I had no idea how to help Stanley, so I just did what Mary had always done with me; we read together. I told him to bring anything he found interesting, but his vocabulary was so limited, this was difficult. At any rate, we'd read, and I taught him to look up any word that he didn't know. I also made up spelling and math games.

And sometimes, I'd read to him one of the books I was reading at the time; again, all things my grandmother had done with me, and for as long as I could remember. My favorite book was *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a book Mary herself had given me, and the sole possession I rescued from our second eviction; its pages dog-eared from repeated readings. Stanley, enthralled by the story as much as I was, loved hearing me read it aloud, so before long, we started trading off, each of us reading a paragraph.

"I'm too stupid," I remember him huffing in frustration, after a particularly tough sentence. "That's not true!" I vehemently declared, pushing a long list of vocabulary words he'd already mastered into his line of sight. He ignored the paper, but I forced him to look at it, and as he did, I saw his face shift from sullenness, to bewilderment, to surprise, and the hint of a smile.

"You're actually a very fast learner," I said. "Yeah?" I remember him asking, as if he'd never heard that before. "Yeah," I echoed in affirmation. He was making some good strings of his own. "And besides," I said, referencing his burgeoning reading skills, "My grandma says never be ashamed of starting out bad at something;

that's the only way to get good at it. She also says, 'Nothin' worth doing comes easy,'" I say, doing my best Mary impression.

And there it was, at last, an honest-to-god, full-fledged Stanley smile. And what a smile it was. It lit up his face and transformed him. That was the moment something shifted. Stanley's confidence improved almost immediately, and with it, his reading. He told two of his friends that I was helping him, and before I knew it, they were also showing up on Saturdays.

By the time the big test came in April, over 30 kids were showing up to read, spell and do math together in my back yard. With that many kids, I needed other methods, so I started incorporating Schoolhouse Rock songs, starting with *Three is a Magic Number*, to learn multiplication tables.

At Mary's suggestion, I asked the local library if they had old books they wanted to get rid of, and they gave me a whole stack. Rev. Graves, the pastor at my church, found out what we were doing, and he bought a number of new books and donated them. Before long, we had our own version of a Little Free Library – only ours was a simple cardboard box.

We worked hard, and I was very excited about not only the progress they'd made, but even more importantly, their renewed excitement about learning. Even most of the guys from that first fateful basketball game were there on Saturday mornings.

Given that I'd done well on the test the first time, I didn't have to take it again. But I was nevertheless outside the testing room, more nervous than if it was my future on the line. Afterwards, they all felt good about it and thanked me; impressed with how much more they

knew and how much more confident they felt. More than half of the study group passed the test and went on to eighth grade. I wish I could say that Stanley was among them. He wasn't.

A few weeks into summer break, I ran into him at a convenience store where he was working for the summer. As I mentioned, students needed an 80 to pass the exam. Stanley made a 78. But he wasn't disappointed. In fact, he was energized by how much progress he'd made in a few short months – more than doubling his score.

For the first time, he realized that he really could do well in school and started talking about dreams of being a lawyer. Since he barely missed the cut off, they'd allowed him to enroll in summer school and if he did well, he'd be progressing to eighth grade after all.

He thanked me again, and when I extended my hand for a handshake, he grabbed it, pulled me in and hugged me. But most surprising was when he went behind the counter to grab his stuff; now that his shift was over. He walked up to me with a book in his hand – *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Just For Ourselves

16. Dignity

The summer before my ninth-grade year, we'd finally moved to the top of the waiting list for the government housing project, for which I was extremely grateful. The year prior had been spent essentially squatting in a condemned house in an otherwise nice area called Bush Hills.

Materially, that year was probably the toughest of my time in the Washington household, simply because of how we were living. The supermarket where I went to make tips was an hour's walk from my school. I'd send my books home with Josie and Little Joe, and head to work straight from school. On my way back that night, after passing the school, I'd still have another 30-minute walk ahead of me.

The house itself, with its partially collapsed roof and cracks in the walls, exposed wiring and holes in the floor, was all but uninhabitable. We had no electricity or gas, so all meals were cooked on a fireplace that didn't vent well. We had no running water, but the woman across the street would allow me and my siblings to fill up every container we could from the hose in her front yard once a day.

I rationed that water to use for everything from drinking to washing a set of clothes once a week, and we'd use the dirty water to flush the toilet. I heated water on the fireplace so that we could wash our faces and under our arms before heading to school each day, and we used a box of baking soda for everything from deodorant to toothpaste to detergent—all things I learned from my grandmother.

I pressed the clothes, using an old iron heated on a bakery rack over the fire. Other kids often taunted us, saying we “smelled like smoke”. But if not for the things Mary taught me, the ridicule would have been a lot worse. Because, despite the wood smell, our clothes were as clean as could be managed in that situation.

Despite the difficulty of living without utilities, summer and autumn in that place were manageable. What got rough was winter. I tried covering the missing windows with whatever I could find to cut the wind, and we all slept in the living room with us five children in a rollaway bed, fully clothed, and Bernice and Joe on a convertible sofa in front of the fireplace.

One particularly cold night, I was awakened by thick smoke clouding the air. It took some work, but I got the kids up, and since we slept in everything, including our coats and shoes, I was able to get them out of the house; us crawling on the floor to the door.

With the kids in the yard, I went back in and woke up Bernice, who finally managed to get Joe out of the house. Turned out, the house itself was no longer on fire. The large log that Joe had set to burn through the night had rolled out of the fireplace, burned through the old hardwood floor, and fallen into the basement, which was flooded with frozen water.

The ice put out the fire, but produced intense smoke. The area right in front of the fireplace now had a 2-foot by 4-foot hole in it, which we simply covered with a piece of sheet metal.

Three houses down lived a middle-aged African American man who was, according to the signs on his truck, a contractor. That log, along with several others, had come from his yard. Joe, no doubt trusting that the man would take pity on us kids, sent us up the alley where he'd have us climb the man's fence and pilfer firewood. His instructions were to bring back a log large enough to burn through the night.

But logs that size were far beyond anything we could lift, so I resorted to using a two-by-eight plank as a ramp, and the three of us older kids would roll a massive log up the plank, over the fence, then up the alley into our yard, where Joe would come out and get it. Looking back, it's a genuine miracle that none of us were ever seriously injured.

My most salient memory of that time was once when we were in this man's yard, rolling a log toward the makeshift ramp. I look over my shoulder and see him standing there looking out his kitchen window at us, his arm holding the curtain back and his expression, stony. There I stood, trying with my eyes, to tell him how sorry I was for doing this to him, but that I had little choice. He stood there for a moment, not moving, before taking a long sigh.

I remember his eyes closing like shutters, and when he opened them again, his face showed understanding. Eyes never leaving me, he gave a slight nod, then the curtain fell back in place. I've carried that moment with me ever since. That night, I told Joe, "We

can't steal any more wood from that man." I paused before adding, "It's not right."

Seeing myself through that man's eyes had been mortifying, and as we'd pushed that log up the hill and into our yard, I vowed I wouldn't do that again – that my dignity was more important than avoiding Joe's wrath. Joe looked at me as if I'd surprised him. Then, he surprised *me* when he simply said, "Alright." I'd thought I didn't have a choice, but I'd come to realize that I did.

We got through the winter, and by that spring, we were headed for public housing. And while others rightfully complained about housing projects, we were beyond excited. Because though vermin-infested, rundown, and barely habitable, they had things like running water, toilets that flushed, heaters that worked, doors that locked, and lights that came on when you flipped the switch – none of which we'd had prior.

This particular development was called the "Brickyard", one of the most dangerous and infamous of the seven such projects built in Birmingham in the late 50s and 60s. Years later, as part of our society's shared recognition of segregated government housing as a failed experiment, the residents would be moved out, and the Brickyard itself, both razed and erased.

But at that time, the compound, which got its name because of the crumbling brick wall that fenced it in on three sides and the interstate in the back, was, in effect, a walled city; one where police and ambulances were rarely seen. The entire complex; the equivalent of eight square blocks, had only two roads in and out and included Bob and Ben's, the only (and vastly overpriced)

grocery store, as well as an elementary school where “project kids” were educated.

By the time we moved there, I was already off to high school, but all my siblings attended. The teachers and educators who worked there were extraordinary, and the school took on far more than academics; they held after-school activities, provided basic healthcare and had a school counselor onsite to help with everything from abuse to trauma. One such counselor would, in the future, save my sisters.

The Brickyard required yet another level of growth and courage on my part. People started calling me “Professor” (due to the horned rimmed glasses I wore and satchel I carried), as well as “Little Preacher,” not because I preached (I didn’t—I found it hard to even speak loud enough to be heard), but because my value system was so different from most people they knew.

It was strange being in a place where what was praised in my grandmother’s community was an oddity here. As a result, I went to school, went to work, and came home. I kept a low profile and most people didn’t even know I lived there.

I’d been accepted into a “gifted and talented” high school, which was quite demanding and required two buses. Between a full-time job, a full schedule at school, a three-hour round trip commute and a household to run and kids to care for, I was too busy for much else.

One of the things I’ve immensely enjoyed since those early storms at my grandparents’, was being out in the rain. I’d take the bus from school to work during the week, then do the near-hour-long walk

home most evenings. It perhaps sounds funny, but for me, very little was more enjoyable than making that walk during an Alabama rainstorm.

I think it was a combination of things, but mostly because the world, which normally felt so crowded and almost suffocating, felt empty and free. Walking along under my umbrella, I hardly ever ran into another living soul, and if I did, they had their head down, trying not to get drenched.

Being the buttoned up kid that I normally was, I was far too restrained to do silly things like shout out loud, sing where I could be heard or dance with abandon. But, in the rain, there was no one around to see me, or hear me, and if there was, they were too preoccupied to notice. So, one particularly rainy evening, on my way home, the impulse hit me.

There, cutting through an empty parking lot, I did something I'd never done before. I calmly sat my bag of groceries and satchel down in the breezeway of a vacant storefront, shielded by my open umbrella, and I simply... cut loose.

In some crazy combination of Gene Kelly and the Nicholas Brothers, Mikhail Baryshnikov and Sammy Davis Jr., there I was, dancing around to music in my head, doing jumps and spins, with a greater sense of abandon and joy than I'd ever experienced before, and perhaps, since.

After several minutes, I was soaked, breathing hard, and deliriously, thoroughly, unambiguously happy. In that moment, I understood what it meant to be free. And then, like a dream fading

away upon waking, the moment receded, but its residue stayed with me.

I picked up my bag of groceries and my satchel, shouldered my umbrella, and walked the rest of the way home, my shoes squishing and me humming and repressing a smile; as if I'd discovered an amazing treasure – a secret paradise in the middle of my own private hell. And I had. This one was for me – one thing that no one, no matter what they did, could take away, and that I'd hold on to for the rest of my life.

“You did what??” I'd ask Mary later that evening, in response to the story she told me after hearing about my spontaneous dancing in the rain. “Every now and then, a body needs to do something just for itself,” she'd said. “That's how we know we's still alive.” She then told me about the time, in 1944, she'd walked into Parisian, a department store chain that competed with Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus, and that was founded and headquartered in Birmingham.

She, in her early twenties, had been shopping, and I'm guessing, was dressed impeccably; the way she always did when she went downtown – even if just to pay the electric bill. The store had a little café, and my grandmother, before Willie James and Bernice were born, before *Brown v. Board*, before the Freedom Riders and Rosa Parks, had walked over, ordered a tea and a cookie, sat down at a bistro table, quietly drank it, then got up, cleared her table, and simply walked away, purse on arm and shopping bags in hand.

I could not believe this; my dear Mary was a lawbreaker! “What did the people do?” I asked, both shocked and afraid for her. “The woman who served me looked at me funny, but then she must've

decided that I was somebody important; so she got my order and I went on my way. Nobody else paid me no mind.”

This isn't surprising; Mary was always a striking woman—a coffee-dark complexion, delicate features, and eyes typical of Native Americans. According to her, our ancestry on her side traces back to that group of Africans who, almost a century before the Pilgrims, staged a revolt, melted into the forest, and took up new lives, intermarrying with the natives already living here.

She'd explained this to me when I was younger, telling me about my varied ancestry; that my grandfather is a descendant of actual Arab Moors (hence, our last name – Moore), about her own trace Native ancestry, and that my own genetic father was either of full or significant Jewish/Eastern European ancestry. Mary's confession on the phone that evening would remind me of Malcolm X's incredible speech, *The Ballot or the Bullet*, and his description of a man who'd gone into a Georgia restaurant in the 1950s:

Right now, in this country, there's 22 million African-Americans—that's what we are—Africans who are in America. You're nothing but Africans.

In fact, you'd get farther calling yourself African instead of Negro. Africans don't catch hell. You're the only one catching hell. They don't have to pass civil-rights bills for Africans. An African can go anywhere he wants right now. Change your name to Hoogagabooga. That'll show you how silly the white man is. You're dealing with a silly man.

A friend of mine who's very dark put a turban on his head and went into a restaurant in Atlanta before they called themselves desegregated. He went into a white restaurant, he sat down, they served him, and he said, "What would happen if a Negro came in here? And there he's sitting, black as night, but because he had his head wrapped up the waitress

looked back at him and says, "Why, there wouldn't no nigger dare come in here."

"But WHY did you do it?" I finally asked. She chuckled and said, "Why were you out there dancing in the rain? Some things we do just for ourselves."

And in that moment, I recognized yet another lesson I'd unconsciously internalized from watching Mary: everything from the blanket she insisted on bringing me home in, to the way she'd wear her "working shoes" for the walk downtown, then, before attending to business, replace them with the "Sunday-go-to-meeting" shoes.

I reflected back on the decision months prior; to make that log I was pushing up the alley, the last one. And I finally got it: those things we do just for ourselves, those down payments on our dignity—on our right to exist—are less about actually staying alive and more about creating a life worth living.

Can't Smile Without You

17. Justice

One of the first things I noticed upon going to live with the Washingtons was the utter lack of routine in my siblings' lives. There were no bedtimes or mealtimes, no meal plans or chore assignments. But I'd learned from my grandmother that the only way a working-class family can function is if we all, even the youngest, pitch in. My job, as a little boy, was making sure everyone got their dirty laundry down on Fridays for the wash on Saturdays.

In this new household, I helped us adopt similar routines. Bernice did the cooking. If we had food in the kitchen, she'd have already prepared dinner and fed everyone before I got home from work. If we didn't, she'd wait, and cook whatever I brought.

Just like her mother taught both of us, she applied the "clean as you go" philosophy while cooking, so by the time she was done, so was much of the work. Necie and Crystal would finish the plates and utensils after everyone had eaten. Joe Jr. swept up and had the job of taking the garbage out to what, at night, my sisters called the "scary dumpster".

Josie and I tackled the wash together. She'd have already gathered together a set of clothes, socks and underwear for each of us, and had them soaking in the tub. (Hot and cold running water

meant that we could do wash nightly instead of weekly, as we'd done before moving to the projects.) Josie and I, side by side on our knees, would scrub them, then hang them on the doors to dry. Always looking for any way to make things a bit easier for me, I remember her staying up late on Wednesday nights to help me shine my ROTC medals and prepare my uniform.

After wash, I'd then check everyone's homework, get to my homework, and finally, to bed. I'd awaken the next morning at 4:45; a habit that's still ingrained even now. Bernice usually got me up. I remember that all it took from her was to quietly say my name from outside my door and I was instantly awake; a holdover from earlier times when I had to sleep with my ears turned on. To this day, I still startle if awakened from a deep sleep.

I'd iron everyone's clothes while she made breakfast, she and I would get dressed, then wake the kids and head out for the first of two buses we'd take. Still dark outside, she and I would greet the same faces each morning; other early risers heading off to work here and there. Bernice, who, according to Mary, could "talk to a fence post and get it to talk back," knew everyone. Ever quiet, I would settle into my seat by the window and dig into any unfinished homework.

After we parted ways, I'd take the bus that took me to my high school on the far south edge of town, in the shadow of Birmingham's Vulcan statue. Bernice and I actually worked quite well together – again, probably due to the fact that we'd been raised by the same parents – and we handled most challenges as a team. When the kids were acting up, her biggest threat to them was, "Wait

till your brother finds out about this.” They might’ve feared Joe, but I was the one they didn’t want to disappoint.

Joe and I had reached some kind of uneasy truce where we simply didn’t talk to each other. One time, I called from work, and he answered the phone; something that, unbelievably, had never happened before. Joe rarely did anything if someone else was there to do it.

I, completely unprepared to hear his voice on the phone, was immediately overwhelmed with anxiety and knew I didn’t have the wherewithal to hold a conversation with this man. I thought about hanging up, but for some reason, pressed forward with what might be the most awkward phone call in the history of phone calls.

“Hello?” “Um, hi, is Bernice there?” “No,” is all he says; him, as surprised to find himself in a conversation with me as I am with him. “Is Joe Jr. there?” “No.” I’m surprised, but press on. “Is Josie there?” “No.” “Is Necie there?” “No.” I can’t believe this! *No one* is home? Finally, I ask, already knowing the answer, because Crystal would never stay home while her two sisters are gone, “Is... Crystal there?” “No,” he says, after a sigh, and I say, “OK, thank you,” and hang up.

Growing up, I’d never had much interest in television; I vastly preferred books and music. So, on weekends, when I got home from work, though they’d all be gathered around the TV, I’d quietly have my dinner, wash my plate, and head upstairs to my room.

Often, one by one, my siblings, and sometimes, Bernice, would abandon the television and gravitate toward my room to listen, along with me, to *Casey Kasem’s American Top 40* and sing along

with the songs. All three girls would try to take me in wrestling, or we'd take turns reading out loud to each other and do homework together. Or, they'd help me with one of my "projects" – everything from making curtains out of sewn-together old clothes to repairing and repainting the desk I found out by the dumpster.

Occasionally, we'd entertain ourselves with silly variety shows in which each of us was required to perform. Whenever they wanted to embarrass me, my sisters would recount the time; after relentless pestering from my brother, I finally agreed to do the most outlandish thing I, up until that time, had ever done. The skit was from *Saturday Night Live*; a show I'd never seen but that Joe Jr. watched religiously.

Since I had no idea who Hans and Franz were, I was quite dubious. But Joe insisted it would be hilarious. So there we are, both of us all skin and bones, posing in our tighty whities and overstuffed t-shirts, Jo, belting out, in a bad Austrian accent, "We're gonna *PUMP YOU UP!*" me, bemusedly going along.

My sisters spontaneously singing the burlesque instrumental *The Stripper*. Bernice and her two girlfriends walking in mid-act, our backs to them; them laughing uproariously. Joe Jr., enjoying being a spectacle and me, absolutely mortified; which only made them laugh more.

Those moments, ones of unadulterated levity and profound silliness, those tiny fragments of forgetting, bloomed, like wildflowers, in the furthest reaches of that desolate landscape. And I, in a sense, for the first time, would be coaxed into imbibing in that heady freedom particular to childhood; all due to siblings I'd never

have truly known had I not been there, or, if I hadn't had Mary, who had given me everything I needed to survive there.

Music had always been important to us; one of the many legacies from my granddad. And given the horror that could erupt into our lives at any moment, its significance only grew. Those silly pop songs nurtured our souls and connected us to the world. For three-and-a-half minutes, we were just like all the rest of America's kids, all listening to that same song.

We couldn't help belting out the backing vocals, ("ooh wah, ooh wah, cool, cool kitty") with the Manhattan Transfer on the *Boy From New York City*, playing our imaginary keyboards along with the Pointer Sisters' *He's So Shy*, and doing the "do wop ditty wop ditty wop do" with Paul Davis' *'65 Love Affair*.

But none of those songs were as meaningful for us as Barry Manilow's, *Can't Smile Without You*. Now, many people think of this song as the ultimate in schmaltz, but for some reason, it struck a chord with us. One time, back when Joe was still hitting me, Crystal, tearing through the house, inadvertently knocked over something and it broke. Joe reacted in anger and threatened to beat her.

This tapped right into my core values; ones I still believe Mary instilled in me, but that she claims I've always had. "You've been that way your whole life," I remember her saying. Once, my grandfather yelled at the twins for not putting his tools back. "If I've told you boys once, I've told you a thousand times," he exclaimed, "To put things back where you found them!"

I could see the crushed look on their faces as they left the room, so I went up to my grandfather and quietly said, "You shouldn't yell at people you love." He opened his mouth, as if to say something. Then, shut it. Then, opened it again. Then, shut it again. And finally, he said, gently, "You're right. What do you think I should do?" "Say you're sorry?" I suggested. And he did.

Normally, I was the most easy-going kid in the world. I didn't care who won at checkers, and being first in line made no difference to me. I wasn't bothered if people made fun of me for not being cool, and I knew my own mind. I remember a group of guys on the playground boasting about the cars they were going to get when they grew up. When they asked me, instead of a Corvette or Porsche, I said I was getting a Chevy Chevette.

They nearly laughed themselves to death, but I just shrugged. "Why??" one of them asked, incredulously. "Because they don't cost a lot of money and they get great gas mileage, but they have four doors for family, and a hatchback for groceries." I remember them blinking at me like I'd grown two heads, but I was fine with it; I knew it made sense to me.

But, like my grandmother, I also had another side. When I saw someone in danger of being wronged, a steely determination emerged. This undeniable, unyielding, bone-deep drive to protect others from injustice would rise up within me, and when it did, I'd stand up to anybody, no matter how big they were, or how much they might intimidate me.

I remember Mary often saying, "Right is right," meaning that the rule of law applies to everyone. I believed that vehemently, which is probably why superhero comics, which are essentially morality

plays in four-color ink, appealed to me so much. So, as Joe started to build up a head of steam in Crystal's direction, I jumped in.

"It wasn't on purpose," I interjected, which switched his ire to me. He claimed I was challenging him, and he ended up hitting me with an electrical cord. But this time when he hit me, I didn't cry. Surprised, he hit me again; the two of us, locked in a test of wills, with me refusing to cry and him, determined to make me. By the end, I had deep cuts and whelps all over my body, but my back, in particular, was torn to bits. But I never shed a tear.

Afterward, lying there on my bed, seething with anger, I vowed that this was the last time I'd let this man do this to me; no matter how it ended. "If your husband ever tries to beat me again," I told Bernice as she put salve on my back, "I promise you, I'll find a way to make him regret it." She let out a long sigh and closed her eyes for a moment, silently acknowledging that we'd reached some kind of crossroads, and that things had to change. I don't know what she said to him, but that was the last time he hit me.

A while later, my sister Josie, always the first of the kids to come to my room, came in to see me. She brought me a couple pieces of candy she had been saving for me – the soft chewy fruity kind that she knew I loved. On her heels came my brother Joe, and my sisters, Necie and Crystal. Necie, who might be the most empathetic person I've ever known, kneeled down by my head and started to gingerly pet me, afraid of hurting me.

And then, very softly, trying to hold back tears, Necie started singing. "*And you know, I can't smile without you...*" she paused, and then went on, a bit stronger, "*I can't smile without you... I can't laugh. And I can't sing... finding it hard to do anything.*" Josie, who

ME AND MARY

was holding my hand, and Crystal, who was sitting next to me, joined in with her. *“You see, I feel sad when you’re sad, I feel glad when you’re glad. If you only knew what I’m going through, I just can’t smile without you...”*

And throughout that entire ordeal, that was the first time I cried.

Somebody's Angel

18. Gratitude

“Calling all angels, calling all angels, walk me through this one, don't leave me alone. Calling all angels, calling all angels; we're trying, we're hoping, but we're not sure how this goes.” – Jane Siberry

If the man who gave me the comics, the contractor who looked the other way while I stole his wood, Mr. Rosatta and Jim McKenzie were all among the first earthbound angels I'd meet, they'd certainly not be the last. While “making tips,” as I called it, I was fortunate enough to meet some amazing people – all of whom saved or changed my life at a time of great need.

For instance, the lady with the big blond beehive who worked behind the deli counter at the large supermarket. Store rules were that she was supposed to toss all of the unsold food at the end of the day, but she always saved it for my family and sold me the entire massive bag for 99 cents. Chicken, macaroni and cheese, cartons of green beans, corn and baked beans – more than enough to feed an entire family twice over. We likely would not have survived without her kindness.

There was the elderly white-haired cashier, about the age of my grandmother, who always brought me clothes that she had ostensibly purchased for her husband/grandson/nephew but somehow, were never the right size. She'd claim to have “lost the

receipt,” and from shoes to jackets to pants, the clothes always fit me perfectly. She and her husband had me over to do yard work, but mostly fed me huge Dagwood-style sandwiches, homemade cookies and lemonade.

Her husband taught me how to use a gas lawnmower, run an electric saw, and build a model ship. I'll never forget the day he said he had to run out to the hardware store and wanted me to go with him. In a Birmingham that was two breaths away from segregation, we walked side-by-side on sidewalks where Negro men still made a habit of stepping off into the gutter, with him guiding me toward the front door of the hardware store, rather than the entrance that coloreds, by habit and unspoken expectation, still used.

I saw people's surprised and sharp glances, then felt him clasp me protectively on the shoulder as if I was his own grandson; making it clear that I should walk, with him, through the front door. I saw those same stares shifting quickly from outrage to defiance to feeling chastised, and perhaps even a bit of shame, before looking away altogether. I glanced up at him, bewildered, only to realize that he was the cause.

Like a papa bear, he was openly staring down anyone and everyone who looked my direction; silently daring them to challenge my right to be there and use that door. As if feeling my eyes upon him, he looked down, smiled his broad smile, pat my shoulder, and into the hardware store we went.

After a day of hanging out over there, they'd pay me as if I'd done actual work and he'd give me a ride home. They had adult kids who had long since flown the coop and who I never met. I so often wish

I could remember the couple's last name so that I could thank their kids, since I'm certain they are no longer with us.

And there were others. There was the woman I called the "dollar lady" because while everyone else routinely gave me a quarter, she, this beautiful African American woman who I always thought looked like the nurse on the show, *Julia*, always, always tipped me a dollar.

There was my seventh-grade school teacher, a blonde, freckled, speck of a woman who, with her own money, filed my application for the gifted high school across town; setting me on a course that led me to where I am today. And Doctors Ken and Paul; Caucasian co-owners of Gilmer Drugs, who were so kind to me, gave me my first job with an actual paycheck, and who, each in their own way, actively mentored me..

There was Rev. James Graves, the minister who purchased and donated the books to our little library. Rev. Graves was founder of Ensley Bible Church, located next door to EZ Supermarket, and where I, at ten years of age, was both the first official member and, by far, its youngest deacon.

Looking every bit of Sugar Ray Leonard, James was this powerful combination of good looks, charisma and genuine caring that drew all kinds of people to one of Birmingham's first intentionally interracial congregations. He was a true believer; in the power of love, in goodness and in grace, and it was he who taught me that being a man isn't about age or stature, but about character.

And Willie Walker, the big brother-like mentor I met at Ensley Bible Church. Willie was something I'd never seen before – a young,

college degreed African American who had worked his way up to an executive level role at UPS, and who owned a condo in Vestavia Hills; an upscale Birmingham suburb located “over the mountain”.

Willie took me out to my first “sit down” restaurant, taught me to properly hold a tennis racket and encouraged me academically. It was he who explained to me how, as a racial minority, virtually all roads to economic independence began with college.

And there’s Sister Rose; who might have been the most optimistic person in the world. An Anglo, Pentecostal social activist, how she found herself married to a surly, hard-drinking steelworker who I never heard say a word of any kind – much less a kind one – to anyone (including her), I’ll never know.

When I was canvassing for Richard Arrington, in his bid to become Birmingham’s first African American mayor, she took it upon herself to book me in historically white churches, drove me, introduced me, and played the piano to accompany me when, at her insistence, I concluded with a song.

There was Joe’s brother, Willie Washington, a giant of a man at 6’8”, who constantly watched out for me, and let me drive his prized Cadillac to the prom, and his wife, Aunt Gwen, warm and gentle, who took me to church with my cousins, me, dressed in clothes she’d bought for them, and who would give us each a quarter to put in the offering plate.

They had two sons, Vincento, who was my age, and Derek, a year younger, and a daughter, Latonya, the same age as my sister Josie. They treated me like another brother, and together, they were the only cousins from Joe’s side of the family who embraced

me. The boys talked me into joining them in pocketing the “church quarters” as they did every Sunday, and visiting the candy store between Sunday school and church. I’m certain Aunt Gwen could smell the candy on everyone’s breath during service.

At home, she would make a whole “heap” of pancakes, and for the longest time, I actually thought that photo of the beautiful lady on the Aunt Jemima box was her. Their daughter, Latonya, was a sweetheart of a girl who I loved dearly, and who would always want to sit next to me at the dinner table or in the car. Both she, as well as Gwen and Willie, have all passed away, but I carry cherished memories of them with me, even now.

Then, there’s Ms. Jeanette, a beautiful afroed woman who could have been Mavis Staples’ twin. Though a war widow raising four kids on her own who were all younger than me, she was one of my biggest tippers, despite having little more than we did. I’d walk with her, carrying her groceries all the way to her house, and she’d insist that I eat something before going back to work. Back before schools were offering free breakfast, she began feeding my younger siblings oatmeal each school day, along with her own kids.

Over time, she would become a confidant; the first person, in this new life, I felt I could confide in about all that was happening at home. She was also the first person outside my family to tell me, in no uncertain terms, “You’re going to go far in life.” Unfortunately, she would die before I even graduated from high school. I often think back and hope she knew how much I appreciated her.

There was my manager at Wendy’s, a handsome, sandy-haired man in his 30s, who wore his huge set of keys on a ring attached to his belt. Whenever I’m asked about the best job I’ve ever had,

it's here, working for this manager that I think of. He constantly found new ways to motivate this racially diverse group of high schoolers, to meld us into a tight-knit team, and to inspire us all to give our very best.

So much of what I know about management, I learned from how he treated us. I remember once, just as I was finishing the closing shift, Bernice calling to tell me the car had broken down, and that she couldn't come get me. It was one in the morning, but my manager drove me 20 minutes in the opposite direction, and told me, if I was ever in need of a ride, to just let him know.

And, of course, there was my high school choir director, Mr. Pruett. At Ramsay high school, the "it" thing to be involved in was not sports or cheerleading. It was the choir; mostly because every spring break, they went "on tour" and the stories about going on tour (what happened on tour stayed on tour) were legendary. I was oblivious to this.

Our school required that everyone be involved in some kind of sport as well as a creative outlet of some sort, so, given that the only thing that I had any real experience with was singing, I chose to try out for the choir.

Mr. Pruett, who was 6'4", classically trained, and about as "out" as one could be at that time, was our school's choir director. The temper of a lion and the patience of a hare, he told me within the first 30 seconds that if I couldn't even speak up loudly enough to be heard, there was no way I was suitable for his choir.

Yet, despite my poor showing, for some reason, he still let me in. I didn't have the money for the choir uniform, so he and two other

teachers purchased it for me. I also didn't read music at the time – a requirement for the choir. So, he gave me a book, and met with me before school one day each week, to teach me.

Many schools had choirs, but what Mr. Pruett accomplished was just short of miraculous: Every year, he took a ragtag group of Alabama teenagers and taught them to perform everything from Haydn's *Mass in Time of War*, to Rodgers and Hammerstein, to mournful Negro spirituals, to clapping and swaying Black Gospel – all in the same evening.

The star soloist in the choir was Edsel, and when we did gospel music, he was, almost always, the lead. In what sounds like the plot of a teenage movie, everyone agreed to punish Edsel by nominating me, the shyest person in the choir. Mr. Pruett, for some reason, went with it, and I was appointed the new soloist for the star role at our annual Benefit Concert.

Gloria, another student choir member, was assigned responsibility for teaching me the song – *Jesus is Love* – a popular gospel song that had been written and recently released by the Commodores, but that I'd never heard. Because of my work schedule and how far away from the school I lived, she taught it to me – line by line – over the phone; her plinking out notes on the piano in the background.

I was awful at the dress rehearsal, forgetting the words, confusing sections, and singing so softly, the microphone couldn't pick me up. My hands were shaking so badly, I couldn't hold the mic. Mr. Pruett, ever the gentle mentor, came over to me, covered the mic with his hand, and quietly said, "If you fuck this song up, I'll kill you right where you stand."

The next night, it was my turn, and the tension rose as everyone in the choir realized that we were all about to be embarrassed because of the joke they'd played. Still, a few of them patted me on the back, wishing me good luck. Like a man walking the last mile.

The music started, and I took the mic, and Mr. Pruett placed yet a second mic on a stand in front of me, to make sure I was loud enough. He gave me a look that seemed to say, "Prove me right."

And apparently I did, though I don't remember. What I do remember is singing so intensely that I felt my teeth vibrating, and utter silence as I put the mic away and walked back to the choir. In my soundless world, I could see them cheering, but it took a few minutes for my ears to turn back on.

There was lots of hugging and back slapping, so I assumed it must have gone OK. The crowd gave me a standing ovation and wouldn't sit down, so Mr. Pruett called me back and we did an encore, me mostly following along in a daze. We wrapped it up again, to applause and a second standing ovation, and this time, I looked at the crowd. And right there, down in front on the right, was my grandmother. I hadn't even invited her; I was so sure that I would fail. But Mr. Pruett, knowing I wouldn't, had.

There are so many others. Most were strangers to me, the vast majority of them, everyday people in the South; many of them presenting as white. None of them had real reason to care for me. But they did, and I'm eternally grateful. I remember telling Mary about them when I was an adult. "Those were angels," she declared, with absolute certainty. "The day I let you go," she continued, "The Good Lord told me not to worry, that a whole choir of angels was gonna be looking after you."

And this wasn't just metaphorical for her. Mary always had an interesting perspective on angels. She believed that, while the harp, wings and halo variety might exist, most of the heavy lifting was done by regular folk, people like you and me, who, according to her, "When God asks them to be somebody's miracle, they do.

The problem is," I remember her explaining, "Most of us get so caught up in our own lives, we can't hear God's voice. We miss our chance, and somebody else gets to bring the miracle that should've been ours into the world." There it was again, that same awareness she'd always had of how it's a privilege and an honor to be this person for others, just as she'd told me that it would've been another family that "got to have you."

There's something powerful about this understanding; that even when we think we're giving a blessing, we're actually receiving one. Even today, I carry it with me. I try to remember that any of us, at any given moment, could be given the opportunity to do something truly loving; to be conduits of the divine, to witness a miracle, and to be, as Mary put it, somebody's angel.

Little Joe

19. Blessing

In one of my early conversations with Mary after moving over to live with the Washingtons, I shared what a heavy burden it was, trying to be a good big brother to the four of them. She said it is a burden, but it's even more of a blessing, which is what she'd explained to Don and Ron, who, until I came along, were used to being the babies.

She wanted them to understand that God had given them a special job, that being the closest to me in age meant that they had the most responsibility, out of all the kids, for helping to keep me safe and making me feel loved. That their job was both the most important and the greatest honor. They took this to heart, and I can honestly say that every day of my life, this is how they treated me.

As a result, I made it my goal to simply make my younger siblings feel the way Don and Ron had made me feel – safe, special and loved. Though my sisters, those three beautiful little girls, would quickly steal my heart and make me want to do anything for them, my relationship with Little Joe is where I'd most see reflections of what I'd had with the twins, and where I'd come to truly understand that bond unique to brothers.

In many ways, Joe Jr. was about as opposite of me as a person can be. I was extremely quiet, highly sensitive, and very much a

loner. Joe was a boy's boy; socially fearless, the life of the party, and he had innumerable friends. If he was awake, he was making noise; machine gun and race car sounds, jet fighters and explosions.

"Whatcha doing?" he'd ask, leaning into my room, with hands on the door frame, and I'd brief him about some book I was reading. If he found it interesting, he come in, flop on my bed next to me, and give me a look, before finally saying, with a flourish of his hand, "Continue!"

I'd read aloud to him, with him constantly interrupting to ask questions. Other times, I'd tell him stories about the comic book heroes I'd made up, about their never-ending fights for justice, and I'd always stop on a cliffhanger.

"And then what happened?" he'd ask, breathlessly. "That's for next time," I'd always tell him. I was constantly planning for the future. But Joe, who had inherited his father's magnetic personality, was always far more interested in living life than planning for it. He was instant gratification personified.

More than a decade ago, we'd lose Joe suddenly and unexpectedly, in his sleep. We had his funeral on a Wednesday, and the next afternoon, Mary, who'd long been ill, followed him. At Joe's funeral, I told this story about him going with me to make tips. "See, it's simple," I explained. "Just stand at the door and ask people if they would like you to take their groceries to their car for them. I'll show you."

He watched me a couple of times and then we split up; me at the doors on one side of the supermarket and him at the other set. After

an hour or so, we met up to compare notes. "I've made two dollars so far," I said. "How about you?" Joe had made a dollar, which was pretty good for a younger guy. We met up again a couple of hours later. This time, I had four dollars and Joe had two.

A little later, I had eight dollars and Joe had five. At the end of the day, we met up again. I had fourteen dollars. I asked Joe how much he had and he didn't answer. Instead, he held out his hand. In it were two quarters. Joe had fifty cents.

When I asked him what happened to his money, he explained that he'd gotten hungry, so he'd gone to McDonalds. "Ok, that sounds reasonable," I said. "But what about the rest?" He explained that he'd seen a friend of his who he knew was also hungry and didn't have any food at home, so he'd invited him along.

And then, he'd seen that McDonalds was selling the new, telescoping, Star Wars light sabers, and he just had to have one, which he proudly pulled out to show me; flicking it so that it opened up, then turning it on. This was shortly after Star Wars had come out. Joe had gone to see it before most folk even knew what a "Star Wars" was, and he was hooked.

I couldn't fault him. He was hungry, so he did what was necessary to take care of himself and others. He was generous and compassionate. And he both loved life and was courageous enough to follow his passions. These qualities would remain true for him throughout his life.

Joe would continue to come with me on occasion to make tips, but mostly, he spent his time pretending to be the *Six Million Dollar Man* and charming the cashiers. I just enjoyed having him along.

Like Dennis the Menace, he was always getting into trouble, but it was hard not to love him for it.

Somehow, Joe Jr. became fast friends with Jim, a customer I often helped with his groceries, though he did it just to tip me, and packed away most of it himself. Tall, handsome and brown-haired, with a Matthew McConaughey grin and probably in his late twenties, Jim looked after Little Joe the way my uncles, and my own Jim at EZ, had looked after me.

I remember him paying Joe a huge sum of money (twenty dollars!) to use Jim's own mower to cut the man's tiny lawn. He took Joe to eat an obscene number of burgers at Krystal's, and he and Joe played video games at his house. All Little Joe could talk about was Jim.

Jim lived about six blocks from the big supermarket, so on Saturdays, I'd take Joe along with me to work, but drop him off to hang out with Jim, and usually, Jim's girlfriend. They'd take Joe with them to the beach, to baseball games, or just have barbeques over at Jim's house, along with their other friends.

Joe, being a natural ham, was the center of attention among this young professional crowd, and Jim was immensely proud of Joe. He became, to my brother, the adult role model, up until then, he had never had, and in a sense, Jim got the little brother he'd apparently always wanted.

One day, Joe showed up at Jim's house and he had moved. Jim stopped by the store that day, left Joe a note with a hundred dollars in it, and explained to me what was going on. Joe Sr., declaring he wasn't going to let another man take his son away from him, had

been making increasingly graphic threats. Things had escalated to the point where Jim felt some kind of altercation was all but inevitable, so he'd requested a transfer.

I never explained all this to Joe, because despite his father's antics, I didn't want to make things even worse between them. I simply told him that Jim's job was moving him far away and that he'd come by to say goodbye to Joe, but had to leave that day. Jim and my brother would never see each other again. But Joe would talk fondly about Jim for the rest of his life.

I know that the odds of this ever being read by Jim from Birmingham are about as likely as finding the proverbial message in a bottle. But Jim, if you do read this, I want you to know what a profound impact you made on my little brother.

He went on to become a decorated Marine, an accomplished businessman, a devoted husband and a wonderful father, as was evidenced by the hundreds of people at his funeral. He never forgot you. And for all you did for him, I want to thank you.

The evening we put Joe to rest, I drove over to the Brickyard, which had since been demolished, and looked at the grounds. My brother was part of the people working to replace that old government housing project with livable homes that could be owned by the people who lived in them; just one of the many ways he was giving back.

I walked over to the wooded area where he and I used to go and pick greenery for the holiday table, and where I'd built him and his buddies a little clubhouse. I thought back on his self-deprecating humor, like the time someone asked him if he knew how to play

chess, and he said, “Sure,” then, proceeded to beat his chest and yell, Tarzan-style, grinning as he did.

I thought about the assignment he had to write about his hero, and how he wrote about me, saying “My brother can do anything,” and about how his unshakable belief in me gave me strength to believe in myself. And I’d think back on Mary’s words to Don and Ron; how she said, “Now, at first, being a big brother is gonna feel like a burden. But you mark my words – it’s gonna give more to you than you ever give to him.”

I knew exactly what she meant, because, as I thought about Joe, that was exactly how I felt.

Cleaning Bricks

20. Prudence

The summer after my second year of high school, I secured what, even today, is the hardest job I've ever had – cleaning bricks. I was working with my uncles Willie James and Don, on a team of other adult men.

The foreman, a nice enough middle-aged Euro-mix, would load us into the back of a large flatbed truck and drive us to the site of a demolished building. Each armed with a hammer, we'd tackle the walls of this building, which had been hit by a wrecking ball. In the hot Alabama sun, we'd separate individual bricks, clean off the remaining mortar, and stack them on pallets.

Old weathered brick sold for quite a bit more than new brick, so this business was quite profitable for the foreman. He paid us 3 cents for every brick that was cleaned and stacked, unbroken. I could average \$18 0 \$20 per day on this job, whereas Don could make \$24. But reigning king was Willie James, who could out-clean every man on the site. He averaged well upward of \$30 per day.

The fact that I did so well was amazing, given my size; when I started in late May, I was 5'1". But perhaps swinging that hammer was good for me, because when September rolled around, I'd grown eight inches. I remember the men singing various call-and-response songs, or Willie James would start vocalizing like Sam

Cooke did in *Chain Gang*, then, when everyone joined in, he'd start singing, "That's the sound of the men, working on the chain gang..." with everyone hammering in rhythm, and the camaraderie would soothe me like a balm.

The job lasted for ten weeks, and during that time, I stayed at my grandmother's house, as the commute would have been too much. By that time, Mary was no longer able to work, due to cataracts, which had turned her brown eyes greyish blue, and had severely impaired her vision. My grandfather continued to take whatever handyman work he could get, but couldn't do the heavy manual labor (like cleaning bricks) he'd so often done in his younger years.

An artisan, the work he so often did was far below his skill level, but he'd just say he was grateful for whatever work God gave him and do it like it was the most important job in the world. Years later, when I heard Martin's "Street Sweeper" sermon (*"If God calls you to be a street sweeper, then sweep streets like Michelangelo painted walls, like Handel and Beethoven composed music, like Shakespeare wrote poetry..."*), I'd realize that I'd long heard a version of it before, from my granddad Olden.

All of this, however, meant that things at their home were often tight, financially. This was shortly after the loss of my uncle, Robert, the oldest of my grandmother's and grandfather's children. Robert, who'd always lived at home, and, as such, always helped out financially, had been tragically killed in an accidental shooting just months prior.

Called "Shug" by the family, Robert had, along with Naomi and my grandparents, faithfully made payments against my sizeable hospital bills incurred those early years of my life, until they were

completely paid off. My grandmother, when talking to me after his passing, would say that Robert had always been, “her right hand”, and Naomi, her left. Though 6’8” and 300+ pounds, he was an extremely quiet man; the very definition of “gentle giant”.

He was head chef at one of Birmingham’s premiere restaurants and was constantly coming up with new recipes in the kitchen at home. A huge WWF fan, he once took me with him to see a live match at Boutwell Auditorium, where colorful characters like Junkyard Dog, the Iron Sheik, Rowdy Roddy Piper and the Road Warriors faced off against each other. His favorite character was, understandably, Andre the Giant. Tragically, a ricocheting bullet would take him from us far, far too soon.

With Robert gone, both Don and Willie James tried to help out as much as they could, but they also had their own lives. My grandmother, both never a complainer and who had survived far worse, didn’t say a word to anyone. By her own estimation, she had sufficient money tucked away for everything she and my grandfather really needed.

They had a savings account that Ron, ever the early adopter, had insisted she open, but like others who’d lived through the Great Depression, her trust of banking institutions only went so far. She kept money stashed away in other places, including under the mattress, in a tin out in the back shed, and even her bosom. “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket,” I remember her often saying.

She was always the household’s financial manager, and for bills, used a system she’d devised herself. In that same purse in the closet where she’d kept my nickels when I was a little boy, was a bunch of envelopes; each labeled for whatever purpose for which

the money was intended. Once it went into the envelope, there it stayed – as if it had already been spent – until it was time to be used.

Installment buying was all the rage in the Roaring Twenties, but Mary had seen the consequences of taking possession of things before you'd actually purchased them. She might not have understood the particulars of compound interest, but she knew that you ended up paying way more than the thing was worth. She'd long ago learned to keep monthly bills to a minimum, and would, instead, save for what was needed.

She'd put big purchases on Layaway, then faithfully make payments, which is how they bought everything from the new washer to the new fridge, from Ron's track shoes to my first bike. "Don't spend money you ain't got," was another of her lessons, and one that, with the exception of student loans, I'd faithfully follow.

They never owned a car, and my grandfather, in addition to them making monthly payments, traded untold hours of carpentry services in exchange for the dilapidated house he'd purchase from a man who owned several, then turned it into our home. So, as far as this rough patch, she was confident they'd be OK.

She'd ensured that they had reserves, there was plenty that could be taken from the garden, and she knew that the modest monthly payment she'd receive from Robert's life insurance policy would be coming soon. For years, she'd used one of those envelopes to faithfully pay on whole-life policies for her, my grandfather and all their children – me, included. I remember the insurance man, who, dressed in suit and tie, and hair parted on the side, looked, to me,

like the dad on *Leave it to Beaver*, coming to our house each month to collect payments.

A nice man, he always addressed my grandmother as “Mrs. Moore” and she’d always serve him coffee and a slice of whatever cake she’d baked recently, then she’d remove her apron and they’d sit and visit for a bit in the living room. Even then, I was aware of the formality of it all, but it was also clear that these two people, from such different stations in life, genuinely liked, and saw, each other.

I got to her house one evening, and after showering off the grime and mortar dust, tending to the blisters on my hands, etc., I went into the kitchen to grab something cold to drink. When I did, I saw something that, in all my time growing up there, I’d never seen before – a nearly empty refrigerator. The sight both saddened me and made me concerned for her and my grandfather’s wellbeing.

So, I grandly announced that I wanted something special for dinner. “What do you want?” she asked. “My favorite,” I said, “Your chicken and rice, spinach salad, and banana pudding for dessert. And okra,” I added. “I don’t think we have all the fixins for that,” she said. “And besides, you don’t even like okra,” she replied, eyeing me suspiciously.

We both knew it was her favorite, not mine. “Well, Mary Moore,” I said – the name I called her when I was being what she’d describe as “cheeky” or I was kidding around with her – “You don’t know everything. And besides, I’m loaded!” I said, waving my hard-earned cash in front of her face like a fan. I remember her giving me a smile, slapping me on the fanny, and saying, “Boy, get on out of here.”

I told her that I was heading to the store to get provisions, and in a variation of a tradition from my early childhood, I asked her this time, if *she* wanted to accompany *me*. She did, and we bought everything we needed for a wonderful dinner. And I don't think I've ever felt prouder.

Seeing Around Corners

21. Forbearance

Long before my senior year in high school arrived, I was plotting my escape from that life. But I knew I couldn't leave with a good conscience unless I'd also done something to get Bernice and the kids into a better situation. That's why I pushed her so hard on the school thing. "Tell you what," I told her, "I will take on most of the household responsibilities so that you can do what you need to do to graduate by the time I leave for college."

To her credit, she worked hard, late nights and early mornings, and she made great progress – right up until the end. The night before her final licensing exam, she let Joe talk her into going out to a big birthday party a friend of theirs was having. They stayed out until almost dawn, with a testing time of eight AM. I was livid; feeling that she'd not only let me and the kids down, but herself. She needed an 80 to pass, and like Stanley had, she missed the cut-off by two points. I graduated, and she vowed to take the test again that fall.

The year prior, tensions between Joe and me continued to rise. While he had long since stopped hitting me, the threat of violence was always there in the background, both from him at home and from others out on the streets. Having spent years in such an

unpredictable environment, one way I'd learned to cope was by anticipating potential outcomes before they happened.

I was constantly aware of my surroundings and always assessing my options. I would think, "What will I do if Joe tries to trap me in this room?" or, "What if this approaching group of guys tries to attack me?" In a practice that bordered on obsessive, I'd scope out the exits of every place I went into, or identify things that could help a small person like me fend off an attacker.

I wanted to know every escape trick I could; what my options were if someone held my head underwater or trapped my hands behind my back, or what to do in case of fire. I excessively scenario-planned; including something as improbable as how I'd manage if someone tried to run me down with a car.

Granted, much of this, beyond the comfort it brought me, was a colossal waste of time: rarely did I need these skills or this information. But this was the only thing that made it possible for me to rest even somewhat easily at night. At some point, much later in my adult future, someone would refer to me as "the man who can see around corners". I'm certain that, to whatever degree this is true, it's an ability that was developed in the crucible that was my life at that time.

Looking back, there's comfort in knowing I found a productive use for this trauma. But what I didn't know back then was that one of my pre-planned strategies – how to evade someone trying to run me over – would save my life.

My senior year, Joe and I got into a fairly heated exchange over money (what else?). He wanted me to give him some and for the

first time, I flat-out refused. We were in the yard in front of my grandparents' house, where I'd taken to staying during school breaks. The house itself was within walking distance of the Wendy's where I now worked, manning the grill. This meant no bus fare, but more importantly, I could easily pick up overtime shifts.

Joe knocks politely on Mary's door and asks me to come outside, I'm guessing, because he doesn't want to make his appeal in front of her. His buddies are still in the car, which is parked halfway on the curb, with pot smoke clouding the interior. He has a story – some unfortunate circumstance that requires my financial assistance.

He always has a story. I'd know he was lying, and he'd know I knew he was lying, but I'd breathe a heavy sigh and give him what he wanted. This time, however, I simply can't go along with the charade. And my unwillingness to do so – especially in front of his friends – infuriates him. He demands an explanation.

In confrontational situations, I tried to remember one of Mary's lessons; that bullies like to blame their actions on their victims. "They love to say, 'You made me do it,'" I remember her saying. Both she and my grandfather had an amazing degree of restraint. They stood up for themselves when it was morally important to do so, but never out of provocation.

I remember us talking about things they had to endure simply to register to vote. "Some folk are dead set on breaking the peace," she said, "But you ain't got to add fuel to the fire." So, in this instance with Joe, to avoid saying anything even remotely antagonistic, I simply repeat myself, saying, "I'm sorry, I can't", then walk away, out the yard and down the sidewalk.

This sends him over the top, with him yelling, "Don't turn your back on me!" He hops in his car, and guns the engine – onto the sidewalk and right toward me. My grandmother, who'd come out when she heard the yelling, screams, "Rodney! Look Out!" I turn around to see him hurtling toward me, already at 30-plus miles-per-hour and rapidly gaining speed.

Surprisingly, I don't panic. Sticking exactly to my already devised plan, I run for about 10 yards, generally in the direction of the nearest tree. He keeps his eye on me and at the last moment, I dive behind the tree and roll away. He swerves in my direction; crashing into the tree at close to 50 miles-per-hour. The car is essentially totaled, but he and his friends get away with only minor cuts and bruises. I am basically unharmed. Joe's rage has dissipated, and he looks almost bewildered, like he's not sure what just happened.

I decide then, that it would be in the best interest of all concerned, if we were no longer under the same roof. I move out, and into a rooming house just north of downtown; the kind where men working in the steel mill stayed during the week. My job at Wendy's paid a bit more than minimum wage, and working full-time, I was able to fend for myself.

The rooming house, which I paid for weekly, took a third of my salary, but came with clean bedding and towels that were left on my door handle each week. I also handed off a decent portion to Bernice every month, to help care for the girls and Little Joe. I'd turned 16 on December 7th. Five weeks later, I was on my own.

Hearing this, the natural question might be, "Why didn't you return home to Mary's?" She did her best to get me to come back. But I

couldn't forget the look I saw in Joe's eye when he'd aimed his car at me, nor the memory of him taking his revenge against the guy outside that bar, all those years ago. I couldn't bear the thought of him rashly vandalizing the house, setting it on fire, or other such thing. My grandmother had given the best years of her life to protecting me. This was one small thing I could do for her; not bring trouble to her door.

Though I'd complete the last part of my senior year on my own, I was still there often, with my grandmother insisting on doing my laundry, my grandfather, on cutting my hair, and other times, just getting a taste of the comforts of home.

My life during that time essentially revolved around downtown; a mile west was my grandparents' house, due south was the Wendy's where I worked, across from University Hospital where I was born, and another mile south was my high school. About a mile due north of downtown was the rooming house. I walked by the Birmingham City Hall and all those historic places at least twice a day.

Growing up, everyone in my life knew me as Rodney Moore. That's what my birth certificate said, and it is what my driver's license said. In grade school, I was always safely in the middle of the pack when names were called in alphabetical order or when we lined up for recess. And Joe had never ceased to remind me that I was a "Moore," living in a family of "Washingtons" (as if I'd be hurt by that); which made his next move all the more surprising.

That spring, Joe and Bernice asked me to stop by. Though skeptical, there was some part of me that still wanted to leave things on as good of terms as possible, so I went. He then hit me

with his latest proposition – he wanted me to change my name to Washington. Apparently, they'd been using my name and birth certificate to open bank accounts, purchase vehicles and get utilities turned on long before I'd even come to live with them.

Even then, two years before I turned 18, my business reputation was already ruined. "But," he told me, magnanimously, as if doing me some great favor, "If we change your name, it all goes away, like that," he said, snapping his fingers.

He then flashed me his Cheshire cat grin – the one he used whenever he was running a con, or covering one up. This was the latter, and I was soon to be complicit, just as I was when I'd burned his blood-soaked clothes all those years before. "He's already signed them," Bernice chimed in meekly, in a tone that was half attempt to be helpful and half-apology. She wouldn't meet my eyes.

I doubt I've ever felt greater antipathy for someone than I did, in that moment, for Joe Washington. Nevertheless, I felt trapped and without a choice. I feared I wouldn't be able to secure a place to live when I left for college, that I wouldn't be able to get a bank account or get utilities turned on in my name. I'd be trapped. For all my planning, this was one scenario I simply didn't see coming.

So, for the good of my future, I allowed myself to take on the name of the man who had made my life a living hell, in order to leave behind the devastation he and Bernice had created in it.

Stripping from me, my name, my birthright, hurt me more than anything they'd done prior. I felt branded, the way they did escaping slaves, if not utterly violated. But I knew two things: 1) That, one way or the other, this injury was the final one, and 2) That one day,

when I was able, I would reclaim my name. I looked at him levelly, until he began to fidget a bit.

“Fine,” I finally said, “But I’ll file them myself.” I would go through with it, but the papers would have Mary’s return address. I refused to give either of them further access to any aspect of my personal life. I took the paperwork and left, feeling a bit foolish that I’d let myself hope that things would end differently than they had, and, for the first time ever, I found myself tempted to question Mary’s wisdom about continuing to believe the best in people.

I was standing at the bus stop, when a grey-haired African American man dressed like my grandfather, touched me on the arm. “You OK, son?” he asked, hand extended and offering me a peppermint. “Thank you,” I replied, taking it from him. “Whatever it is,” he said, meaningfully, and sounding suspiciously like Mary, “It’s gonna be alright.” It was only then that I realized I’d been crying.

Don't Come Back

22. Hope

I'd applied to several colleges, but strangely enough, had received no responses of any kind; neither acceptance nor rejection letters. I didn't know exactly how the whole college thing worked, so I wasn't sure schools even sent letters of denial. Bernice had gone to UAB, but as a transfer from a local junior college, her acceptance had been almost automatic.

I'd received a single piece of mail, this one sent to my high school, inviting me to try out for the track team at University of Oklahoma, and I thought, "Why not?" It met all my criteria: It was far enough away from Alabama that Bernice and Joe could never just show up at my door, the weather wasn't cold *ALL* the time, and it wasn't in California, which intimidated me back then, as it did most Southerners.

"But places like Kansas, Oklahoma and Iowa," I thought, "You never hear anything bad about them." From those times when I was a little boy, when we'd all gather around the television on Thanksgiving evening to watch *The Wizard of Oz*, I've always had a soft spot for Midwestern wholesomeness.

So, even though I'd not heard anything back, I decided to just go. I figured it couldn't be any worse there than what I'd faced in Birmingham, and the last several months had shown me that if I didn't get into school in the fall, I was capable of working and supporting myself, and I could work toward getting in the following year.

It was not until I was actually at Oklahoma University that I'd discover that the acceptance letter they'd sent to the rooming house had been returned marked "undeliverable – no one here by that name". The letter was addressed to "Washington". The woman who ran the rooming house, of course, knew me as "Moore".

The morning of my departure, everyone shows up at Mary's, which is where I've been staying since vacating the rooming house, for a bit of a send-off. Sid has to work 3 – 11, so they'd planned it so he could be there. Mary whips up a big breakfast and afterward, I'm loaded down with gifts. Pat and Naomi give me bedding; two sets of sheets, a blanket, two pillows, and a wonderful quilt they'd made for me, along with a couple bath towels and wash cloths.

Sid stands me up and slips his pea coat from his Navy days over my arms. He says it will keep me warm in the Oklahoma winters. He rolls up the sleeves a bit, but it's also evident that, at the rate I'm growing, it will soon fit me. Don brings out a massive, heavy-duty, metal footlocker to ship my belongings in, and Willie James outfits me with a new digital watch and hands me a new calculator.

My grandmother, who had purchased my Greyhound bus ticket and gotten me a knapsack that she'd packed full of enough of my favorites to feed me for days, hands me \$50, which I add to the \$50

I've got. I'd left the rest of my money I'd saved with Bernice and the kids.

She then hands over a toiletries kit that she's fully stocked with every personal product I could ever need, along with things like band aids and Neosporin, my epilepsy medicine and my inhaler, the latter, I no longer need. "Just in case," she says, and I give her a smile, both amused at her fussing, and unbearably touched by her unwavering care and thoughtfulness.

My granddad places my favorite hat of his – a herringbone flat cap that I was always pilfering – on my head, ties his favorite red scarf, one that Mary had knitted, around my neck, and hands me a brand new pair of insulated leather gloves that he'd personally monogrammed for me, with the initials RDM, his way of telling me I'd always be a Moore.

I remember him, by then, a few inches shorter than me, hugging me tightly, his strong, callused hand clasping me firmly by the neck and his voice, shaking with emotion, saying to me, "I'm proud of you, son." I wrap my arms around him, and for a long moment, I just hold onto him; this man whose arms had so often carried me, and who I love so dearly, before whispering a watery "thank you".

Later, Mary pulls me aside and tells me, "Your mama called, and she really wants you to come by and say goodbye." I go, and when I arrive, everyone's there waiting for me. Both the girls and my brother give me a wonderful assortment of gifts they'd made for me, and they'd all pitched in to buy me my favorite candies for the journey.

Bernice hugs me tightly and kisses my cheek, before handing me a couple paperback novels she's gotten for me to read on the bus trip; one sci-fi and one western. And Joe Sr., in a move so surprising, I find it inexplicable, holds out a carrying case that contains a compact, manual typewriter.

Our last encounter was the name-change conversation a few months prior, where I'd left both heartbroken over their behavior, and embarrassed that I still cared; that I'd let it hurt me. I'd told myself that this might be the one case where Mary was wrong; that if there's one person worth giving up on, it's him.

And yet, here Joe stands, tentatively holding in his hands the first gift he'd ever given me, and something he'd clearly worked hard to get. "Here's the receipt, in case you want to take it back," he says, letting me know it was something he'd actually purchased.

I stand facing him; me, by that time, only a few inches shorter than him, with all that had happened between us flashing through my mind like thumbing through an old fashioned flip book. I'm sure it all plays out on my face – confusion, suspicion, reflection and finally, resolution. I remember thinking, "Good thing Mary isn't the type to say 'I told you so.'"

Neither Joe nor I make a move, and all suddenly falls quiet in the room, with everyone watching us. Finally, I nod my head a single time, then accept his peace offering, and as I do, it's like unmuting the TV; all the simultaneous conversations that were happening before, begin once again.

I give hugs to Bernice and my siblings, shake Joe's hand, and leave. Unbelievably, that same old man who'd shared his

peppermint with me months prior is, once again, waiting for the bus. This time, however, I get to return his kindness; sharing a few pieces of my newly acquired candy with him.

Back at Mary's, everyone gathers on the porch to wave goodbye, in what I realize, for the first time, has long been one of our family's informal rituals. A cab is there, and both my grandmother and Don accompany me to the bus station. I've already checked my luggage, and the bus is about to board. "OoooklaHOMa City!" I hear the announcer saying.

I look at my grandmother with tears I can hardly hold back, and she says, "Now, don't you start that. You'll get me going." I want to tell her, "Thank you, for everything," but that feels unnecessary, so we just hug; her, by this time, barely coming up to my chest. She then reaches up, puts her hands on either side of my face and says, "Now, you listen to me."

"I want you to get on that bus and not come back, you hear me?" I look at her in confusion. "I want you to go as far in life as you can, and don't turn back." "Your life is out there, not here." "You get to that school out there in Oklahoma and you make me proud, you hear me?" "You make me proud."

I pull her to me and I can feel her shaking as she tries to hold back the tears. "Go on, now," she says, shooing me, "Before you miss your bus." I get on, and take a seat where I can see her. And for the second time in my life, a moving vehicle is taking me away from the place I feel most safe in the world. She holds up one hand in a wave, and stands there, statue still, with Don's arm tightly around her shoulder, until I can see her no longer.

PART THREE

Norman, Oklahoma

23. Goodness

It takes 28 hours to travel from Birmingham to Oklahoma City by Greyhound bus, but it took only about 30 minutes for utter exhaustion to hit me. And I don't mean just grief-induced tiredness from saying goodbye to Mary; this was the kind of fatigue that only years of intense trauma could cause.

I sank bonelessly into my chair; my head propped against the window and I lay there, not moving a muscle for hours – just watching the scenery go by. I couldn't stop thinking, "I'm free; I made it." I felt as if I was a rocket; needing an incredible amount of energy just to break free of Earth's gravity. Others back home had sensed the gravity as well.

"Keep going," people would often say to me, "You're gonna be the one to make it out of here." Implied was a sense that I was special; which made me sad. One should not have to be "special" to even have a chance at a decent life and to realize one's potential.

I lay there without moving in the slightest and I reflected on all that had happened in my life; how it led to this one moment. As we were driving along, it started to rain outside, rivulets of water running

down my window and turning the landscape into a misty silhouette, lush with possibility. I've always loved that sound.

When I was a boy and too sick to go outside, Mary would get me situated in the big lounge chair by the living room window, and I'd alternate between reading and watching the raindrops race their way down the windowpane. Other times, I'd be nestled in my bed with the window slightly open. I loved the feel of the occasional spray of mist coming through the screen, and listening to the patter amplified on the metal roof; a thousand tiny drum beats.

On the bus that day, I lay there listening to a similar sound, softly humming *Everybody's Talking*, always one of my favorite songs; about a place where the "sun keeps shining through the pouring rain" and where everyone's expectations are "only an echo in my mind". I then curled up in my pillow and blanket, head against the window, and just let myself be carried away to a new life.

I'll never forget the change in landscape as we moved toward Oklahoma City. "Is this Oklahoma?" I remember asking the woman sitting next to me. "Yeah, it is," she said, "What do you think?" "It's so..." I thought for a while, "...flat," I finally said. And it was; like a table. I'd never seen anything this massive and so level; no trees to speak of, no hills, just the occasional oil rig; all the houses built ranch style and low to the ground.

We stopped in every Oklahoma town of any size along highway 40, so I got to see a lot of the land. In its own way, I found it strangely beautiful, and I was fascinated by the people. One such stop was at a building that was general store, post office and bus station all in one. I got off and headed into the store to grab something to drink, and noticed a guy sitting there in the gravel parking lot on the

back of his pickup truck, tailgate down, wearing cowboy boots and a snap-button shirt, cigarette in one hand and soda in the other, enjoying the sun.

He had his sleeves rolled up, and I remember noticing how much tanner his forearms were than his pale hands. Then, I saw his well-worn working man's gloves sitting there and realized I was seeing a real live Oklahoma cowboy; Eddie Rabbit's *Drivin' My Life Away* playing through the windows of his pickup. I'd always liked that song. I gave him a smile and said, "Great song." "You betcha," he said, toasting me with his soda and giving me a smile in return.

At another stop, a handsome, dark-skinned, presumably African American man – one of only a few that I had seen – got on and took the seat across the aisle from me. He was probably in his 30s, and like the other guy, was wearing western items; in his case, cowboy belt and a black Stetson. He placed his hat on the seat next to him and asked me where I was headed.

"I'm going to college!" I said, proudly, and I think, a little too loudly. He chuckled and said, "Good for you, Youngblood." "I think you're going to do well there." It was he who explained to me that though my ticket terminated in Oklahoma City, my journey didn't end there. Norman, he explained, was just south of Oklahoma City by about twenty miles. I'd need an additional ticket to get there. Before that moment, I'd never even heard of Norman, Oklahoma.

After exiting the bus in Norman, the first thing I did was call my grandmother. "I made it!" I yelled in the phone; so excited, I might have even been hopping up and down. After getting off the phone, I started looking around for the building where Oklahoma University was housed, but couldn't find it. I asked inside the bus station, and

was told I'd need to take a cab to the campus. "Campus?" I thought. I didn't realize there was an entire *campus*.

The cab driver and I loaded all my stuff into his trunk and he took me on what must have been the most circuitous route possible – about a 30 minute cab ride in a town that was only 10 minutes long. He asked me, "What part of the university do you want to go to?" I said I didn't know. I didn't know there were parts. "How about Walker Tower," he said, so I agreed; not knowing what that was. Walker Tower was the main residential dorm and the headquarters for new student registration.

Twelve stories tall (which was a skyscraper in Oklahoma), it was one of several dorms surrounding Couch cafeteria; a large, flying saucer-shaped building that fed thousands of hungry students 20 meals per week. We were on our own on Sunday nights. The Walker Tower area was frenetic with activity. It was the Saturday before school was to start and hordes of parents were there with their kids; dropping them off, moving them in and getting them situated.

The parents; teary-eyed and melancholy. The kids; anxious and excited. They were frantically buzzing around me like thousands of human ants after the ant hill had been stepped on; pushing wheelbarrows and rolling carts, toting in TVs and bikes, loading and unloading cars. The only person standing still was me.

The cab dropped me off at the corner, in the center of all this, and charged me \$10, which, after the additional bus ticket, left me with \$45. It would be years later before I figured out that the Norman bus station was about a mile away from campus.

Here I was, standing on a street corner in a state I'd never been to, in a city that, until the day prior, I'd never heard of, with everything I owned in the world sitting there on the sidewalk beside me. I remember thinking, "Ok. You're here. What now, Rodney?" I didn't know where to begin, so I decided to leave most of my stuff there and pick a building at random. May as well go where everyone else seemed to be headed.

I stepped up to the information desk, which was being manned by two disaffected upper classmen wearing "Ask Me" buttons. I told them that I was there to go to the University of Oklahoma and I remember the girl, probably a graduate student, smirking. "Well, you're in the right place," she said. "Where are you staying?" the boy asked. I said I didn't know. "Where's your paperwork?" he then asked. "Paperwork?" I'm thinking, but say nothing.

"You don't have any paperwork?" he asks incredulously, but not meanly. "No," I finally say. "I never received anything." "So, let me get this straight; you don't know what dorm you're staying in, or even if you've been admitted to the university?" He made it a question, but I didn't answer. "Oh, you poor thing," said the girl, grasping the gravity of the mess I was in. They looked at each other and silently agreed; they'd do what they could to help.

The boy informed me that I could not check into housing until I had paperwork from the Bursar's office, which was closed on weekends. "But," interjected the girl, "There are rooms on the second floor of this very building that you can rent for \$2 per person, per night. They are usually for family members visiting their kids, but we can make an exception." They got me set up in room 206 in Walker Tower, on a floor of otherwise empty dorm rooms.

They helped me move my stuff in off the sidewalk and get settled in. They explained to me where to go on Monday and assured me that I'd certainly gotten in. "With ACT scores like yours, you'll be fine," they said.

I thanked them profusely, and they just laughed, saying how much they enjoyed it. I was both wired and tired when they left, but more than anything, I was hungry. My grandmother's massive lunch had fed me for the entire trip, but by that time, most everything was gone. I knew I was going to have to be careful with my money. At this point, I had only \$41 left after paying for two nights in Walker Tower. Not knowing where a grocery store was, and feeling I'd reached the end of my courage, I opted for the little store on the first floor of the dorm.

I bought Spam and Vienna sausages, two cans of stew, a few pieces of fruit, Cheese Whiz, and a big box of saltine crackers. I figured all this could survive without a fridge, and could feed me for a few days, if needed. Monday, I would see about school, figure out a place to stay, and get a job. I knew that, if nothing else, I could get work at the Wendy's I'd seen on my way to campus.

I showered, ate, and made my bed with my new bedding from Pat and Naomi. Then, I lay on top of the bed, wrapping myself up in the quilt my aunts had made with their own hands; nestled in the love of my family. I thought back to the conversation I'd had with Mary just before I left. "Come here, Rodney," she'd said, "Let me talk to you."

I sat down and waited, already feeling a bit sad that these conversations that had been anchor points throughout my life would, in the future, be so much harder to come by. She took one

of my hands in both of hers, and said, "You're grown now, and you're gonna meet all kinds of folk out there in the world. Some are gonna be good to you, and some, not. But if I've learned one thing from this life the Good Lord blessed me with, it's that if you expect goodness from folk, then nine times out of ten, that's what you get."

Years later, when I heard the William Butler Yeats quote, "*I have believed the best of every man, and find that to believe it is enough to make a bad man show him at his best or even a good man swing his lantern higher,*" it was Mary's wisdom I thought of. Already, just three days into this new journey, she had, once again, been proven right.

My First Week

24. Kindness

The feeling of being away at college was beyond words. Everyone was ecstatic with freedom – them from the control of others and me from responsibility for anyone but me.

When I showed up at the Bursar's office on Monday, I found out that I had, in fact, been accepted, and even had a partial scholarship, though not enough to pay for everything. I'd been assigned to a dorm room at Cross Center that I could move into that day, and best of all, my student ID allowed me entry into Couch cafeteria! I couldn't stop smiling as I got settled into my permanent dorm room.

All the other students talked about how bad the cafeteria food was, but I thought it was wonderful. Each meal had two to three entrees, an assortment of vegetables, and a range of desserts; all you can eat. There were dispensers where you could get as much milk, juice or Coke as you wanted. And you could have breakfast cereal at any meal. You'd think I would have put on weight, but I didn't.

By the end of my freshman year, I was just over 6 feet tall and just under 150. I was a distance runner, and very much looked the part. From Laura and Jeremy, the upperclassmen who had helped me

that first day, to guys in my dorm, I made friends easily and quickly; utterly stupefied by the fact that people seemed so interested in getting to know me. This was an experience I hadn't had in practically forever, and simply couldn't understand it. I looked the same. I still wore glasses. My clothes were still old and ill-fitting. I had the same frizzy hair. But somehow, it didn't seem to matter.

In high school, I was the shortest person in school until my junior year. So short, in fact, that even the girls used to jokingly rest their elbows on my head. I was a ROTC cadet, but with a 27 inch waist and similar inseam, no uniforms fit me.

Today, at over 6'2", I still find myself forgetting how tall I am, which has led to several accidents involving my head and low hanging objects – and kitchen cabinets. So, while my height was no longer a problem, my clumsiness, as I grew into this new, gangly body, in my opinion, more than made up for it.

I never shortened my name to "Rod." People at college just naturally did that, and I didn't protest. I've never cared much one way or the other, but all of a sudden, along with it came a proliferation of nicknames – Mod Rod, Hot Rod, both Rods Serling and Stewart, Rod the Bod, RD, RDub, and Rowdy Roddy – some of which, even I didn't understand. How I became so well-liked and well-known, always confounded me; especially since in my mind, I was still the kid that no one knew existed.

One change, however, was my deliberate effort to be friendlier. If there's such a thing as "painfully shy," then I, especially during my time at Bernice and Joe's, was in agony. I had a couple crushes during high school, but I only asked one girl to go out with me. Her name was Sheryl.

It's not like I had real experience with this, so I did what any self-respecting high-schooler with the dating skills of a sixth grader would do – I wrote her a note. I think I said something like, "I have a confession to make. I like you and I was wondering if you would like to go out some time?"

We were already friends, so I expected any number of responses – ranging from "let's just be friends" to "sure," but not the one I got. She looked at me with a "you have GOT to be kidding" look, crumpled up the note, dropped it on the floor and never spoke to me again. At least I was self-aware enough to recognize that this was more about her than about me, and I never held it against her.

Neither my grandmother nor my grandfather, despite having such gregarious kids, was particularly extroverted, so I remember once asking Mary how to "come out of my shell"; something I'd heard one of Bernice's friends saying about me – "That boy's WAY too quiet! He needs to come out of his shell!" "Well, first of all," my grandmother said, seeing right through me, "Ain't nothing wrong with you. You're a quiet boy, and still waters," she said, "Run deep."

Then, she went on to list a number of other qualities she saw in me – that I was thoughtful, considerate, a good listener, and "didn't say every fool thing that popped into my head" – all outgrowths, in her opinion, of me being an introvert. "Loud people have to learn to do a whole lot of things," she said, "Including shut their mouths. The only thing quiet people need to do is learn to get out of their own way."

I asked her what that meant, and though I can't remember her exact wording, the gist was that it's not about how much we talk, but how much we care. The key, according to her, is recognizing that "Ain't

nobody got it all together,” and at the same time, “Helping each other along when you can.”

Mary, no more than a girl, and on her own upon moving to Birmingham, learned to best her own fears simply through kindness; by focusing more on what people around her needed, than on what they might be thinking of her. As the bus ferried me from Alabama to Oklahoma, I thought about how this was my chance, in this new place, to do something similar.

I decided that from then on, I was going to follow her example and focus more on being a friend than needing one. That’s why I said hello to the cowboy sitting on his tailgate, enjoying the sun, when in the past, I would’ve put my head down and crept into the store. It’s why I had so many great conversations on the bus, and how I ended up getting so much help from Laura and Jeremy that first day.

Turns out, that one decision would pay off in ways I’d never imagined: Before I knew it, I was one of the more popular people on a campus of 20,000 students. A few months in, I remember seeing a blond-haired girl coming toward me with her name “Mandy” stenciled on her sweatshirt in those bubble letters that all the sorority girls used. Intending to have a bit of good-natured fun, I said to her, “Hi Mandy”, as I passed. “Oh!” she said, as if surprised I knew her, “Rod, how are you?” I remember checking my own sweatshirt to make sure that the joke wasn’t on me.

As the semester wore on, I’d find myself quickly involved in a number of clubs and campus activities; attending as much as work and studies would allow. The whole thing felt as surreal and dream-like as did my arrival at my mother’s house, years earlier, but in an

opposite sense. The experience was as wonderful as that one was terrifying, but neither had felt quite real. That first Monday after the cab dropped me off, I followed up on job leads from the work-study program and by the end of the week, I was working at the Stovall Museum.

Over time, I got to be great friends with Susan Hoggard/McAlister, my manager, a beautiful woman who all the boys thought looked like Kathleen Turner. I was able to charge my books to my student account, which was partially paid for by financial aid. So, I had everything I needed. By the end of that first week, I'd gotten into school, I had a place to stay, and I had a job. Oh yeah, and I started classes.

Don't Make Me Come Out There

25. Fortitude

By November, it became clear to me how in over my head I was. It wasn't so much the classes themselves (my high school had prepared me surprisingly well for college). It was everything else that was hard.

As an out-of-state student, my tuition was three times that of students who were Oklahoma residents prior to attending college, and unlike Native Americans, African Americans students' tuition wasn't waived. This meant that a scholarship that normally would have covered books, fees and most, if not all of my room and board ended up only covering a portion of my tuition.

I applied for financial aid, but since I'd already missed most of the deadlines, I was informed it would take months before money came in and even then, what I got for that year would be minimal. Three months in, and I still didn't know how I was going to pay for the education I was getting.

In addition to my museum job, I managed to get work at a convenience store all day both weekend days, and an industrial cleaning gig five hours each night. All three severely cut into my study time, not to mention my sleep, and made putting in the weekly

mileage required for track, almost impossible. The Sooners being a huge football powerhouse, working the store on game days was like drinking from a fire hydrant; for eight straight hours.

For my cleaning job, since I didn't have a car, I was given a single client; a local industrial plant (they made big metal cowboy-style belt buckles and other similar items) as my contract. I'd come home every morning covered head to toe in soot, and the bathrooms alone would probably have qualified as one of the *Discovery Channel's* dirtiest jobs. I was by no means a stranger to hard work. But putting in these kinds of hours while trying to manage college was getting to me.

And then the university deactivated my cafeteria card; meaning I could no longer get meals. Two days later, at the crack of dawn, I returned from my night job to a pending eviction notice. I picked it up, and remember seeing my fingerprints smudged across this salmon-colored notice informing me that if I did not pay my bill by the end of the month, I'd be locked out.

Shoulders hunched, I grabbed my toiletries kit and headed for our floor's shower room. I stripped off the filthy clothes, turned on the water, stepped into the stream, and before I knew it, I was crying.

"I can't do it," I said into the phone, tears abated, but still not far from the surface. "It's too much." I was doing what I did whenever I ran into a problem I thought I couldn't handle; I called Mary. She did what she always did. First, she listened, throwing in the occasional "Lord, have mercy," as I gave her the rundown. Just that alone made me feel better.

Then she got indignant about the people at that school who demanded that I pay more money for one year of education than she'd ever seen at any point in her life. "And where do they expect you to come up with that kind of money all at one time? What the devil is wrong with those folk? Have they gone crazy?" she asked rhetorically.

Just having someone understand how tough this was did me a world of good, and I was feeling less defeated already. She told me that she wanted to call those folk at that University of Oklahoma and give them a piece of her mind. I almost laughed out loud as I imagined her saying, "Don't make me come out there!" "Don't worry about it," I told her. "I'm sure I can take care of it on Monday. I just needed to talk about it."

And amazingly, in a matter of minutes, she'd moved me from despair to believing once again that I could do this. She finished by saying to me, "Now listen here, you don't have to stay at that school if you don't want to. But I don't want to hear you saying that you can't do this. You can do anything you set your mind to. If this is what you want, you find a way. You hear me?" All I could say was "yes ma'am."

Two days later, I went in to see the people at the University to find out how I could work this out. When I gave my name, I was told I'd need to speak with the Dean of Student Affairs and I immediately thought, "This can't be good." I was wrong. When I walked into her office, the first thing newly minted Dean, Anona Adair, said was, "Would your grandmother really come out here from Alabama?" I laughed in spite of myself.

Writing Letters

26. Acceptance

Neither my grandmother nor I could afford to call as often as we liked, so we started writing letters. I'd tell her everything, starting with all my new friends; describing them in detail.

She heard about my job at the museum and about Professor Farmer, who taught my Zoology class of 500 students, who kicked people out with regularity and wouldn't allow you in if you were even one minute late. I told her about the cafeteria food and how flat Oklahoma was. I told her about all of my fascinating courses, the things I was learning and ways I was growing and changing. I told her everything.

That semester, my English class required that we keep a journal, so I decided to keep it for Mary. That turned out to be a good way to kill two birds with one stone. We'd talk on the phone about once every three weeks. Back then, long-distance calls were expensive, so whenever I called, I'd hear whoever answered the phone saying, "Go get Ma, and tell her to hurry – its long distance!" Mary would always end the calls the same way – "I love you, and I'm so proud of you."

She, in turn, wrote to me about happenings in Birmingham, about my aunts and uncles, and when she had it, news of my mother and the kids. She'd usually say something like, "I saw Bernice the other day and she was looking OK." Or, "Bernice came by and told me that they had nothing to eat, so I packed her a grocery bag of food and sent it home with her." She told me about Don and his marriage to Diana, and how some people didn't approve.

Diana is a wonderful person, and while I'm sure some people, somewhere, were uncomfortable with them being an interracial couple, that didn't bother my family at all. What had them up in arms was the prospect of Don adopting her faith tradition and becoming a Jehovah's Witness.

When he quit celebrating birthdays and holidays, my family, given how important "family" is to us, felt an understandable sense of betrayal and abandonment. However, rather than addressing this with Don, many chose, instead, to blame Diana.

My grandmother, for her part, wasn't the least bit bothered. She started having people over on Thanksgiving AND the day prior; so that Don and Diana could come without violating their beliefs. She passionately defended her son; saying that whatever religious practices he kept, what mattered was the kind of man he was. And as for Diana, my grandmother made it known that she was her newest daughter, and anyone who had a problem with Diana had a problem with her.

More than thirty years later, my Uncle Don and Aunt Diana are still happily married and just as in love now as they were then. They found ways to integrate their faith practices with family responsibilities; sometimes bending some on one side, or making

adjustments and exceptions on the other. Diana welcomed me into her heart as her husband's "baby brother", and for all the little ones who would come after me, out of all their many aunts and uncles, Don and Diana are the favorite.

Mary was a vehement and absolutely stubborn defender of family. Whether you were a member by birth, marriage or fostered in by decree, if you were "family", they were behind you, with all they had. Being part of her family was both a great privilege and significant responsibility. I was a beneficiary of this throughout my life, and I can tell you from personal experience that it is a powerful thing.

Many people talk of family values, it was my grandmother who made sure we lived them. It required that each of us offer everyone support in every way that one could, as well as unconditional love and acceptance. "They're family," she'd say, as if it should be obvious to all of us that nothing else mattered.

This was something that, in every instance I can remember, Mary modeled. She made it clear that no matter how you change, where you go or what you do, this would always be a place you belonged. And if there were boundaries to her authentic acceptance, no one I knew ever found them. I had a cousin whose birth certificate said "male", but who'd realized that they were a girl. She began to dress the part, began the transition process, and she changed her name to Emma Jean.

Others snickered, refused to call Emma by her new name and indicated that she was not welcome "dressed like that", and especially not bringing that New York boyfriend. My grandmother said, "Now, I don't understand all that, but I do know this: We're

going to call that child whatever they want to be called, if y'all got a problem with that, you'd best get over it, and no one can say who's welcome or not welcome in my house." Case closed.

Mary lived this so thoroughly that it seeped into her genes. And because of her, there is a tenderness, a compassion, a generosity embedded in the spiritual DNA of every one of her children and grandchildren; and that runs counter to the often harsh judgment of this world. It is one of her gifts to us. If we inherited musicality and forbearance and activism from my grandfather, we inherited humanity and resilience and the sacredness of family from her.

And years later, at her 70th birthday party, those two heritage streams came together with her large, musical family performing Sister Sledge's *We Are Family* – "All of the people around us, they say, "Can they be that close?" Just let me speak for the record – we're giving love in a family dose!"

Don, Pat, and the others often kidded me about the special relationship I had with Mary. "If you robbed Fort Knox," they'd joke, "She'd be running around saying, 'He must have had a good reason.'" And all kidding aside, it never even occurred to me to doubt her. I just always knew – on a foundational level – that no matter what I did or who I turned out to be, I would always have her full, unequivocal support.

This was such a fundamental assumption for me that I never even thought about it; which is probably why I felt so comfortable telling her everything. Throughout my life, we'd always found a way to talk. When it couldn't be in person, it was by phone. And when not by phone, we wrote letters.

I started keeping her letters, as they accumulated, in a shoebox. Years later, I remember opening that box and seeing her neat cursive, written on flowery stationery; all the letters in order. But the unexpected surprise was that I could smell her – that combination of lilac-scented talcum powder, greenery from her garden, and something else that I can't identify; but that was unmistakably her.

None of the letters had a scent on their own, but together, there she was; with me, as always. It was as if, with each one, she'd shared a bit of her essence. Which is exactly what she'd done.

Christmas

27. Clarity

After my first semester, I caught a ride with a friend as far as Memphis and took a bus from there to Birmingham; heading home for the holidays. Sitting there waiting for the bus, Kenny Loggins' *Celebrate Me Home* was playing, the lyrics reminding me of so much of what I missed and was looking forward to.

Christmas was always a special time for me as a little boy; no doubt because it seemed that at my grandmother's house, my entire family devoted their every effort to making it memorable for everyone; but especially for me.

My grandfather put up those old-fashioned colored lights around the roof of the front porch and the living room windows; with my grandmother declaring that he was going to fall off that old rickety ladder he insisted on using (instead of the new one the kids bought him) and "break your fool neck." He never did.

I remember the way those lights looked when the windows were fogged up from all the cooking going on; like a winter wonderland. There was a fresh-cut tree that the entire family decorated together and that had far more presents stuffed beneath its branches than it could accommodate.

On Christmas morning, when I woke up, Aunt Naomi and Uncle Sid, as well as Aunt Wing and Big Daddy, would already be there, and both Pat and Robert would already be up; helping out in the kitchen. We couldn't open presents until Don and Ron were up, so it fell to me to remedy that.

My grandad had the fire going and was bustling around tuning the radios to the same station playing Christmas music. This was Christmas to me. Holiday season at the Washingtons could not have been more different.

My first year there, I remember Christmas fast approaching, but even a few days prior, there were no signs that it would ever reach that house. We had, quite literally, nothing. It saddened me that my siblings had no concept of what the holiday could be like, so I took it upon myself to add at least a tiny bit of specialness to the day. I cut branches off of a Juniper bush, tied them together and put them in a gravel-filled coffee tin. This was our Christmas tree.

I took the Sunday funnies and any other colored paper I could find and cut it into those folded paper-people chains we all learned to make in school. I cut the white paper into snowflake ornaments and I added leaves that my brother Joe gathered, and pinecones that the girls colored with crayons, all hung by sewing thread, to its branches.

I made presents for each of the kids to go under the tree. For my brother Joe, I made a version of BRIO's *Labyrinth* marble game. I removed the top of a cardboard box and glued strips of cardboard to it; creating a maze. I reattached the top so that it tilted back and forth, as well as side to side; controlled by sticks on all sides of the

base of the box. The goal was to get a marble from one end of the maze to the other.

For Josie, I painted rocks for jacks in the art room at school and bought her a 10 cent ball. I also made her a beanbag toss game; filling old baby socks with pinto beans and sewing them shut. I made Necie a child-sized kitchen range and fridge out of small appliance boxes and some dot-to-dot worksheets. And I made Crystal a cardboard paper dollhouse, along with a cardboard doll and a variety of paper clothes.

On Christmas morning, I remember getting up early and looking at how ragtag and pathetic the whole assemblage looked. I felt ashamed, embarrassed and defeated and I could feel the tears flowing down my cheeks. And at that moment, the kids burst into the room – ecstatic with wonder, laughter and gratitude. Where I saw old cardboard boxes; somehow, they saw amazing treasures and all the magic of Christmas.

I'd managed to purchase a package of paper plates and plastic utensils, and did my best to replicate for them the dinners I'd grown up with on Sundays and holidays. When I arrived, their house only had one of everything – one fork, one spoon, one plate and one bowl – so everyone ate two at a time; with one person getting the bowl and fork and the other, the plate and spoon.

I was stupefied to discover that my siblings had never eaten a meal all at the same time. That Christmas, we changed that: I bought the food, my mother cooked, my sisters made place settings, and my brother and I, in what would become a family tradition, picked wild greenery and arranged it as a centerpiece.

Over the years, things got better and from that first Christmas on, I planned far in advance to make sure that on that one day, they had gifts, a proper tree and a good meal. The Christmas before I left for college, I suspected this might be our last one together for a while, so I went all out. I got really nice presents for everyone, including my mother, who got a new “interview suit” from Cottons; a really nice women’s department store.

Even Joe got a present; I bought him a new watch. I remember my mother dancing around with the jacket of her suit up against her chest, laughing. I remember Joe coming over to shake my hand vigorously and pat my shoulder, genuinely smiling. And I remember, as usual, there being nothing under the tree for me.

Later on, however, all of my siblings gave me little things that they had made or saved for me – a card, a really interesting and lovingly polished rock for my rock collection, candy, a painting they’d made for me, a comic book; along with apologies that they didn’t have more.

With tears welling up in my eyes, I was unbelievably touched, and I tried my best to make sure they knew that those gifts, and the love that prompted them, were the best presents any big brother – that anyone, really – could ever hope to receive. “We’re going to miss you when you’re gone,” Josie, always my little lieutenant, said, and the others, all of them misty eyed, agreed. So, this Christmas, a year later, I was excited to surprise them. I had gifts and everything.

I’d told Pat that I was coming, but not my grandmother; wanting it to be a surprise for her as well. Pat made sure that she was home when I was to arrive, late afternoon, the day before Christmas Eve. I ring the doorbell just for fun, and Don opens the door and sees

that it's me. He quietly closes the door and tells everyone to ignore the doorbell; that it's me. I keep ringing and I hear my grandmother fussing about how nobody ever does anything around there and if you want something done, you've got to do it yourself, as her footfalls get louder.

She opens the door and there I am, flowers in hand, and I say "Delivery for Mary Moore." She gasps, and spry as she is, it crosses my mind that the shock might be too much for her. I needn't have worried. She opens the screen door, and says, "Boy, get in here and quit clowning," a twinkle and moisture in her eyes. I drop my bags, hug her, and the family descends on me; all laughter, hugs and pats on the back. I stay the night there, in the midst of that familiar warmth, still not able to get a hold of my mother.

The next day, I show up at their house and she and Joe invite me in. The house is quiet, except for the TV. "Merry Christmas," they say, and I return the greeting. Joe, visibly older, gets up and turns off the television before saying, "So, how's school?" I, in no mood for small talk, simply say, "It's going fine," followed by, "Where are the kids?"

Turns out that my mother had not gone back to retake that test. Nor had she ever used the interview suit. She was drinking more than ever, and her eyes looked vacant. Little Joe had, according to Bernice, "run away", but I'd discover that he's still living right there in the projects, bunking with his best friend, Darnell. I stop by their house, but they'd all gone to Darnell's grandmother's for the holiday. I leave his gift with the next door neighbor.

Bernice also informs me that the girls have been taken into custody by the State of Alabama Child Protective Services, but she has no

more information than that. I sit there, using their phone and calling every state agency I can, but I can't find anyone who will tell me where they are or let me see them. I feel deeply let down by and disappointed in my mother. And I feel guilty for having left; for letting this happen.

I leave Bernice and Joe's cinderblock apartment; never to return. Heartbroken, I decide to catch the bus back to school early. I head back to my grandmother's and spend the actual holiday there with the family, but I'm too saddened to stay for long, and I know that my demeanor is affecting everyone else. I tell Mary that I have to head back to school early, and she just looks at me; knowing I'm being less than truthful, but also knowing why.

"They're going to be OK," she tells me softly, as she pats my arm; having finally seen whatever it was she needed to see in my eyes. I leave the gifts for the girls with her and she says that when she hears from them, she'll get them to them. And I know that she will; just like she kept every nickel I gave her to keep.

I take the bus out the next day. Someone's radio is playing softly and Elton John's latest is all over the airwaves. "I guess that's why they call it the blues" he sings, with Stevie Wonder's mournful harmonica woven throughout, "Time on my hands could be time spent with you..."

Three days after Christmas, I'm back in my place in Norman. I call Mary to let her know that I'd arrived safely, and she passes on a phone number; one of the people I'd called was the girls' school counselor. He'd called back and affirmed exactly what my grandmother had said; that they were OK, and had asked that I call

him. I do. He puts me on hold, and when he comes back on the line, unbelievably, so are the girls!

We talk only briefly, and they can't tell me anything about their whereabouts or situation, but want me to know I don't need to worry. "Those sisters of yours near drove me right crazy," the counselor says, southern twang thick enough to cut. "They were so sure you'd be back there at that house, looking for them." I tell them that Grandma has presents for them and then they have to go.

I sit there full of all manner of conflicting emotions; sadness and gladness, concern and relief, but more than anything, gratitude. Once again, Mary's unshakable faith has proven true. "When our hearts are in the right place," she'd said to me, "God will do what we can't."

I think about the conversation we'd had a few days prior, just before I'd left. Sid was out scraping the windows of his car, in order to give me a ride to the bus station. Mary and I stood there on the porch, me, wearing the pea coat Sid had given me; my only item of clothing that truly fit my lanky build. The weather was cold, and she had on nothing but a dress and apron, so I wanted to end the goodbyes quickly.

But she had other plans. Gripping me by the forearm, as if to emphasize that she was conveying crucial information, she said to me, "Rodney, just remember this one thing; God ain't cruel." She went on to say that me going off to school was "exactly what I needed to do", and that the "Good Lord" would never set things up so that the right thing for one person was the wrong thing for everybody else.

And there we were again, back to the idea of how the moral universe itself works; that it bends toward justice. She then pulled me down for a kiss on the cheek, pushed a lunch into my hands, and I was off.

That entire experience, from my siblings being gone, to the beneficence of Mary's wisdom, would reveal two important things to me. The first is the nature of clarity, how what we hold to be true about the world shapes our actions. The second was a realization: while Birmingham would always be the place I was from, the place that shaped me, and thus, always close to my heart, it was no longer my home.

As a result, I suddenly felt released to pursue my own destiny. I recalled the day I'd originally left, how Mary, before putting me on that bus, had implored me to go forward and find my future out there, instead of turning back. And in that moment, I knew I was truly on my way.

Tim and Samir

28. Benevolence

“Winter, spring, summer or fall, all you’ve got to do is call; and I’ll be there.”

James Taylor, *You’ve Got a Friend*

Of the 20,000 students at Oklahoma University during the time I was attending, only about 400 (or 2%) identified as African American, and the great majority of these were varsity athletes; mostly members of OU’s legendary football team. The Asian and Latinx student population was comparable, and Native American students, at slightly over 5%, was the equivalent of all three.

I was there during one of the many high periods for the Sooners football dynasty, including a National championship in 1985. As a student, an athlete and a tutor, I got to know people of every ethnicity, and was involved in a wide range of activities. I was, for example, simultaneously involved in the *BSU* (Baptist Student Union), where most students and every staff member identified as white, and the *BPU* (Black People’s Union).

And while there were a few social straddlers like me, for the most part, we were the exception. Though no longer mandated, *de facto* segregation persisted; including in places of higher learning, like Norman. In the school’s eating facilities, most Native, Asian and Latinx Americans, and virtually all African Americans congregated together, despite the dorms themselves being integrated.

In both the larger Couch cafeteria and the infinitely cooler, though smaller, more retro Kate cafeteria, you'd usually find one table where the minority students sat together, even if they walked back to the dorm with their white-identifying roommate.

People were friendly; but there remained unspoken barriers – vestiges of earlier times – that many were still hesitant to cross. For me, Oklahoma's Midwestern culture was different enough from the South that, at first, I didn't know these barriers even existed.

For all the social trailblazing I was doing, there were only six or seven times that I felt truly racialized. There was the time a minister tried to discourage me from taking my friend, Alicia, as my date to the annual banquet, and to instead, take the only African American girl in a Christian student group that numbered close to a thousand; someone I didn't know.

There was the mother who I overheard asking my new roommate if he was going to be OK living with "one of them". And there was the time I arrived at a party just as a guy I knew and considered a friend was telling a racist joke. "What does it say on the inside of a black man's lips?" he says. His back is to me, so he does not realize I've walked in.

But the people hearing the joke do. "Inflate to ten pounds," he says; expecting laughter, but instead, he's faced with uncomfortable stares and fidgeting bodies. "What?" he finally demands, and someone subtly tilts their head in my direction. He turns around to see me, turns cherry red, and starts to apologize profusely.

I'm angry – less because of the joke and more because of the impact it has on the gathering, and on my friends – and knowing

that, once again, it now falls to me to smooth this over. “It’s OK,” I say. “I know that Paul isn’t racist.” “An idiot,” I continue, ruffling his hair, “but not a racist.” Everyone laughs, and the tension dissipates.

Incidents like these notwithstanding, right from day one, I was awash in wonderfully caring friends who would enrich my life and forever change me. But two of the most consequential were Tim Pelley and Samir Ebrahim. Tim was from Mena, Arkansas; a tiny little town just over the Oklahoma border. That visit to Mena the fall of my freshman year would be my first of many.

I remember Tim, his slightly older brother Boyd, and I, the car packed with laundry (including mine, which Tim’s mom insisted I bring); us eating road trip junk food and Boyd, along with Tim’s help, trying to avoid speed traps. “This is a place where they’re always waiting for you,” Tim explained, as we crept down the hill through some one-block town whose name I don’t remember.

As we’re driving through Mena’s small downtown, out in front of one of the stores is a boy about the same age as me, sweeping the sidewalk. I’m sitting in the front passenger seat; Tim, by that time, is behind the wheel, and Boyd is in the back seat, perhaps sleeping.

As we drive through at under 20 MPH, the boy on the sidewalk and I make eye contact and he has this surprised, though not hostile look on his face; like he’s seeing something he’s never seen before.

And that was true. Mena had no African American population, so the only darker-skinned people he’d ever had the chance to see would have been on TV; perhaps Arthur Ashe or Sidney Poitier, or, by that time, Billie Dee Williams; known the world over for his portrayal of Lando Calrissian.

I remember this guy staring at me, trying to puzzle this out, with each progressively slower sweep of his broom; his mind working the problem. I cautiously hold up my hand in a wave and am surprised when he waves back. A slow smile spreads across his entire face, then mine, as if we're both aware that something profound – a moment of genuine human connection where two people, looking past what they've been told they're supposed to see, and instead, truly *seeing* each other, has, in this passing moment, occurred.

Despite the fact that I was the first real-life African American that most of the people in the town of Mena had ever seen, I was welcomed and well-received. Tim's mom, no doubt after doing my laundry, insisted that we go downtown, where she bought both me and Tim new pairs of jeans at the western clothing store. I remember being a bit hesitant that I'd be treated poorly and that it, in turn, would make Mrs. Pelley feel bad, but I needn't have worried. The saleswoman treated me no differently than she treated Tim.

From day one, Tim Pelley was both my staunchest ally and fiercest protector. Like Jim at EZ supermarket, Tim was my first true friend in this new place, and like Jim, it was almost as if he knew I needed someone to help ground me in it. He was deeply committed to my full inclusion in every aspect of life there in Norman. And by all measures, he succeeded.

But perhaps most amazingly, he accomplished this without ever – not even once – making me feel as if he saw me as any different from anyone else. His friendship was another wonderful gift already waiting for me when my belongings were set on the curb that day in front of Walker Tower; the same dorm in which Tim lived.

Samir, on the other hand, lived in Cross Center, and he and I met the very first day I moved into Kelly House. Samir was part of the so-called “Arab Contingent”, a number of bright young men who’d long been traveling from Saudi Arabia to be part of the university’s world renowned petroleum engineering program.

In that magical way that things happen in college, Samir and I ended up in each other’s social orbit, though I’m not sure exactly how. He had the Arab guys pulling him in their direction, and I had my friends, by this time, from both black and white circles, pulling me in theirs, and both finding the Middle Easterners foreign.

I, however, did not. Perhaps it was because of my high school’s foreign exchange program, which brought to a cloistered Birmingham, voices from all over the world. Among them were Mohammed and Ali, two devastatingly handsome, identical twin Iranian boys, who every guy wanted to befriend and every girl wanted to date.

Mohammed was in my Current Affairs class, and when our teacher predicted – unfathomable to us – that gas prices were going to double to over a dollar per gallon by the end of summer, he added insights to that discussion that most of us had never thought of. So after classes and lunches with the Iranian twins bearing the same name as “The Greatest”, a friendship with Samir happened easily and naturally.

Samir, with his ready smile, quick mind and warm eyes that missed absolutely nothing, was, like me, trying to find his own way to be an individual in a world where everyone wanted him to remain a category. And in this sense, we were both semi-outsiders; both

slightly out of phase with contexts in which we were supposed to seamlessly fit.

I am a person of mixed heritage, but few people at OU seemed to notice that. So, I was surprised when one evening, Samir asked me where I was from. "Birmingham," I said, "You know that." He tried to clarify, "I mean, where's your family from?" I still didn't get what he was asking, so he blurted out, "Is your family Egyptian?" He went on to explain that he'd always thought I looked like someone from Egypt, but that he'd been hesitant to ask; afraid of offending.

That conversation would make me realize the degree to which I, even with Middle Eastern, Native American, Hispanic and Asian friends, still viewed the world through my myopic American lens. For instance, I'm embarrassed to admit that it never dawned on me that Samir might not be Christian.

I don't think I even knew what Islam, the world's second largest religion, was. But as the state religion of his country, that's probably what he practiced; privately, in his dorm room, with no one in this new land even aware of the month he likely spent observing Ramadan.

Late night study sessions would turn to talk of his homeland and my family, of dreams and obligations and our place in this world. We'd talk of the American concept of race, and why we did things the way we did, and why we seemed to hate everyone – Arabs for having the oil, the Japanese for making better cars, the Russians for threatening our perceived global supremacy, and so forth.

I didn't have answers, and sometimes, I was even the one asking the questions; fascinated by his outsider's point of view. Samir

always carried within him a serenity that I'd rarely seen, and that I wanted to emulate. As his time in America came to an end, he gave me a gift; an ivory letter opener with a line of intricately carved elephants marching along the top. I still have it; tucked away in my box of keepsakes I plan to hold on to forever.

Tim and Samir are but two examples of something I'd come to know to be true about Oklahomans in general; that they're some of the most genuine, caring people in all of America. Yet, every few years, with unnerving regularity, the university community has suffered from terrible racist incidents, including throughout 2020.

But each time they occur, it's like it's the first time; everyone continues to be completely and utterly surprised. It's as if no one sees the link between how students are acting out and the ways they're being socialized in their segregated churches and home towns, in their schools and families. Long before setting foot on OU's campus, these students have been fed a steady diet of racist scripts and taught how "those folk" are not like "us folk".

But race is a fragile construct. And it doesn't take much to realize all the many ways they, in fact, really are like us, and we, like them. So when these kids finally run up against diversity of every kind, they're forced to either reject what they've been taught or act to defend it – a choice we all face. In their case, however, the same environment that taught them the ideas they're defending, suddenly and brutally turns on them.

When they're caught on a 2015 video singing, "*There will never be a nigger in SAE*", or when, in 2019, two female students post a video of themselves in blackface, we want to treat these eighteen- and nineteen-year-old kids – one year away from home – as if

they're the actual villains of this story. The bad apples. Despite their actions, they aren't. They're just another kind of victim, and expelling them won't do anything to change the social environments that, throughout their lives, taught them this view of the world, then tasked them with defending it.

For my part, I'd process the many things that happened to me the way I always did; by talking with Mary. She did what she usually did, let me "speak my mind" as she called it, before giving me essentially the same simple advice she'd always given: 1) No matter how we were raised, or what we were taught, each of us must decide what kind of people we will be as we move through the world, and 2) Even good people have an allotment of stupid things to get out of their system.

That's why God invented forgiveness, which was her response when I told her about Paul's racist joke, and admitted that, while I'd not shown it at the time, I'd felt a sense of hurt that I was having a hard time letting go of. Mary was astounding (and sometimes, infuriatingly confounding) in her ability to extend grace to people.

But this wasn't just because of the person she herself tried to be. It was equally rooted in her unshakable belief in us; that everyone carries within them a spark of indomitable goodness, and that when we connect, the fire is both stoked and shared. As a result, I'd learn to recognize the goodness that radiated from people like Tim, and the way he'd moved through the world, or I'd recall that moment of genuine human connection with that kid sweeping the sidewalk in Mena, Tim's home town.

And likewise, when I was tempted to judge others, or see them solely in light of their failings, I'd remember my own shortcomings

and ignorance with respect to my friend, Samir, and his culture, and how he himself never judged me. How his friendship made me a better person.

That's what powerful connections do; they ripple through our lives and leave us changed. I'd seen Mary do this time and again, from her caring for Grandma Mattie Lou, to her belief that George Wallace, who declared, "Segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!" would one day return to the inclusive humanitarian stance he held early in his career. And he did.

In the end, though it was Martin who taught me the importance of perceiving people – not based on the color of their skin – but by the content of their character, it would be Mary, by her wisdom and example, who'd teach me how to live it.

Three Remarkable Women

29. Power

It's strange to realize that twenty years prior to my enrollment at Oklahoma University, the Birmingham Campaign and March on Washington were just occurring, the *Civil Rights Act* had not yet been passed and Negroes were still subject to awful (and lawful) discrimination and segregation. From OU's founding in 1890 until the 1950s, segregationist policies – enshrined in both state and federal law – were stringently upheld.

At that time, the entire state of Oklahoma provided higher learning for coloreds in only one place – Langston University – an undergrad college in central Oklahoma. Originally named Oklahoma Colored Agricultural and Normal University, the school was established as an alternative to Oklahoma State (then, called Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, or Oklahoma A&M); which either needed to admit colored students or provide them with a suitable education alternative.

Langston was a four-year school, so colored students wanting to attend graduate school were sent out of state. That is, until twenty-one-year-old Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher, who, after graduating from Langston with honors, sought admission to the University of Oklahoma's law school, at the urging of the National Association

for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), under Thurgood Marshall.

After reviewing her credentials, Dr. George Lynn Cross, the university's president (and after whom my freshman dormitory, Cross Center, was named), advised her that there was no academic reason to reject her application, but that state statutes prohibited integrated classrooms. It was also unlawful for any professor or teacher to instruct classes comprised of what they described as "mixed races", or for students to attend such classes.

Under the statutes, Dr. Cross would personally have been subjected to fines of \$50/day, and each Anglo student attending any class with a Negro present, fined \$20/day – this at a school with no tuition. Ada's 1948 application was denied. Two years later, after a string of losses and appeals, the NAACP would represent Ada before the United States Supreme Court, in *Sipuel v. Board of Regents of Univ. of Okla.*, and the court would rule unanimously that the state must provide equal quality of education to its students irrespective of racial identity.

Ada's fight for entry to OU's law school would have implications beyond the state, however. It would set precedent for the Supreme Court's subsequent ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*; which struck down segregated education itself. In response, the Oklahoma Legislature set up an entire law school, such as it was, exclusively for Ada. Named Langston University School of Law, it was thrown together in five days and set up in a State Capitol Senate room. Ada refused to attend, on the basis that this education was not substantially equal to the education received by students at OU's law school. She ultimately prevailed.

Later in her life (and six years after my own graduation from the university), Ada would be appointed to the Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma – the same school that she had to fight all the way to the Supreme Court to attend. (It's also not lost on me that it was Ada's sacrifices that made my own attendance possible. The same goes for fellow Birminghamian Richard Arrington, who would finish his Ph.D. in Zoology at OU in 1966, then go on, twelve years later, to become Birmingham's first African American mayor. Ada paved the way for both of us and so many others.)

At the time Ada was finally admitted, as the only Negro student in the law school, she was seated in a roped-off chair with a sign that read, "Colored", and had to eat in a segregated, chained-off and guarded area in the law school's cafeteria. Later, Ada would recall how some of her fellow students would crawl under the chain and eat with her when the guards weren't around.

These practices became the norm. As more minority students sought enrollment, they were confined to separate eating facilities and restrooms, separate reading sections in the library, and roped-off stadium seats at football games. In classrooms, they were relegated to the back of the room behind a row of empty chairs and their own sign which read "Colored."

Less than thirty years later, I was attending. And though the signs had been taken down, it's understandable why African Americans were reluctant to push forward into places where they'd been so clearly unwanted, and why, even when they no longer needed to sit at a specific table for "coloreds," that's, most often, what minority students did.

I, however, remembering the hardware store incident from my childhood, felt obliged to take a different path; the metaphorical front door. As a result, I unwittingly became a bit of an ambassador, or perhaps, more accurately, a bridge. From this unique vantage point, I started to notice a disturbing pattern – the alarmingly high attrition rate among minorities – despite many of them being National Merit scholars and among the brightest students in the state. This hit home when one of my closest friends told me that he was leaving.

“And how’s David doing?” my grandmother asked, as she worked her way through my list of friends. She always remembered their names and would ask about them; partly, I suspect, as a way of making sure that I actually *had* friends. “Oh, he left,” I said, before launching into my whole thing about all the students that were dropping out. “If it bothers you that much,” she said, “Then that’s God’s way of telling you that you should do something about it.”

So, I decided to speak with the Dean of Student Affairs – the same one my grandmother called. Dean Anona Adair, with whom, by that time, I had a bit of a relationship, was, as OU’s first female vice president, a history-maker herself. Though a longtime university administrator, turns out we were both newcomers of a sort; her first year in this role coincided with my first year at the university. Dean Adair asked me what I thought could be done, and I made some suggestions; the same kind Mary, were she there, would have.

For my grandmother, none of our supposedly big problems were as complicated as we liked to believe they were. According to her, everything would be better if we could all just be a little better to each other. Before I knew it, following her advice had me, once

again, in deep waters; this time, leading my first social justice effort at OU. Sooners Together was a multiracial student-led program designed to help stave off the high attrition rate among college-going minorities at the school by simply, including them.

The consensus of the group we convened was this: The real reasons these students were leaving had little to do with what happened in the classroom, but rather, beyond it. Financially, they suffered, just as I had, from deep economic distress that made even things like eating when the cafeteria was closed on Sunday nights, problematic; not to mention washing clothes, getting a haircut or making long-distance calls home, immensely challenging.

Going in on late night pizza from Dominoes was as essential to the college experience as declaring a major, but students like me had no money to pitch in. For my part, to avoid embarrassment, I'd excuse myself and head to the library, which was always open late. Even with my scholarship, financial aid, and all the working I was doing, it was still tough to live adequately while trying to go to school; a problem for me that wasn't solved until I became a Resident Advisor; a job that came with room and board, plus a small stipend.

And while this was more a problem of economics than ethnicity, these conditions plagued a disproportionately high number of minorities. Tuition waivers for Native Americans meant that they were, by and large, the exception. Financial aid was often sufficient to meet their other expenses. But for many other ethnic minorities and those from lower income backgrounds, not to mention the

students that were both, getting an education often meant working long hours and taking on significant student debt.

Practically, Sooners Together worked with the university's Financial Aid office; making suggestions for becoming more sensitized to the challenges these students faced, devising creative solutions, and, quite frankly, infusing dignity into the process. For instance, we suggested that they handle sensitive conversations about student needs in a closed room rather than at a teller's counter in front of anyone in earshot.

We helped get rid of the university policy of denying food and threatening to evict enrolled students, and worked with the student housing office to introduce programs that deliberately drew marginalized residents further into the dorm's mainstream social circle. In general, though the "Colored" signs had been removed, there were all kinds of social spaces that were, simply by default, effectively off-limits to minority students.

For instance, we supported campaigns for minority students running for student government, and in 1987, Terry Carr became the first African American female elected as student body president; an election she won in a landslide. We tackled other challenges, including going on recruiting trips to minority high schools and taking white-identifying university students along with us, so that they formed relationships with the prospective students before they even got to campus.

Overall, the initiatives seemed to be helpful, and for me, was my first adult opportunity to use my own life experience to benefit others. My time with the Washingtons gave me insight into the hurdles that students from challenging backgrounds face, whereas

my upbringing by my grandparents and all those angels who'd walked beside me, had prepared me to adequately clear those hurdles.

Having been able to give back to the school that gave so much to me is one of the things of which I am most proud. And in doing so, I felt that I was not just a benefactor of the history that came before me, but part of laying the groundwork for that which would come after. But in the end, if any good was done from these efforts, the credit belongs to three remarkable women – Ada, who threw down the gauntlet, Anona, who took up the challenge, and Mary, who made me think that change was possible.

Leader of the Band

30. Love

My senior year at OU, I receive a call from my grandmother letting me know that my grandfather Olden has passed away. He'd been ill for quite some time and has finally succumb to cancer. I go back for his funeral; the first time I've been to Birmingham since that first Christmas. I help my grandmother with funeral arrangements and spend time with my family.

My grandfather was, according to my way of thinking, the epitome of what it means to be a gentleman; in the very best sense of that word. Picture those men in the old advertisements, in their suits and bow-ties and wingtip shoes, overcoat draped over forearm and hat in hand, as if about to put it on, with a twinkle in their eye and with the tiniest hint of a smirk; as if they're in on the joke and about to share it with you. Now, picture that man as African American and you have my granddad.

A man of quiet, yet unassailable, dignity, he was always composed and polished; even with his sleeves rolled up and hard at work on some task or another. During the week, he worked as a carpenter, handyman, laborer or whatever he could find. He worked around our house and in the garden on Saturdays, and as a minister and elder, was at church on Sundays.

Content to be the Pip to my grandmother's Gladys Knight, he was always there in the background, ever-reliable and doing whatever was needed; for his family and community. He was a practical man who, despite being a minister, gravitated toward concrete ways to help. So, when the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, only eight blocks from our house, was bombed, he was there looking for survivors.

Just a week prior to the bombing, Alabama governor, George Wallace, in an interview with *The New York Times*, stated that he believed the state needed a "few first-class funerals" to put a stop to the Civil Rights movement and desegregation efforts. This was a particularly startling turn for Wallace, a state judge who had previously made his first run for the office with the backing of the NAACP. He had a reputation of fairness and had a long history of breaking segregationist convention and addressing Negro attorneys by "Mr." rather than simply their first name.

When asked, during his second campaign, why he'd so radically shifted tactics, he replied, "You know, I tried to talk about good roads and good schools and all these things that have been part of my career, and nobody listened. And then I began talking about niggers, and they stomped the floor."

My grandfather was an exceptional musician, and while singers proliferated in our family, only he and I also played instruments. He was a wonderful guitarist, and his soulful harmonica playing could move one to tears. Every Saturday evening, his quintet, which sang the kind of old school Jubilee gospel that was parent to both Black Gospel and Southern Gospel, and grandparent to both country and soul, would show up at Rev. Moore's to rehearse, with my

grandmother putting out a spread that included homemade cake, usually her famed 7-Up pound cake, and coffee afterward.

Those evenings would often turn into sing-alongs with Naomi or Pat or Ron taking a solo, or the group taking requests. Neighbors would also stop in, drawn to the singing coming through open windows, better entertainment than much of what was on TV; bringing food with them and turning the affair into an impromptu potluck.

Years later, those aging men, with a few “young’uns” thrown in, would reunite and perform, one last time, at my grandfather’s funeral, in front of a packed church and to tears, shouts and rousing applause. After a somber rendition of *The New Jerusalem* (“Over there, where there will be no more creed, color, race; we’ll be at peace forever!”), they’d bring down the house with *Loves Me like a Rock*; a song on which Olden used to play guitar and sing lead.

A superb craftsman, he could repair anything, no matter how broken, or make anything out of wood, and together, he and I spent untold hours on an elaborate landscape for my train set. I’d dream up things we could make, he’d carve them, and together, we’d paint them. Sometimes, he’d return from his handyman work with something; a bit of mirror that would be transformed into a pond, or a snuff can that became a grain silo.

When I think of him, I always picture him sitting on the front porch, one argyle socked leg crossed over the other, alternating between whittling, his harmonica and his pipe. I remember hating the way his cigars smelled, but I loved his pipe. In a little game we’d play when I was young, he’d announce, “I’m heading out to the porch for a smoke,” (he wasn’t allowed to smoke in the house). “You want

to come?” Eyeing him speculatively, with my head tilted a bit to the side, I’d say, “Are you smoking your cigar or your pipe?” “Fine,” he’d say, sighing, theatrically, “The pipe.”

Mary rarely sang, so I’m inclined to believe that the musicality in our family’s genes came mostly from him. Perfectly trimmed mustache, with a penchant for suspenders and pocket watches, he constantly matched striped pants with textured sport coats and patterned bow ties, and somehow, on him, it worked.

He and my grandmother had seven kids together, and while they didn’t often express it publicly (he endearingly called her, “mamma”, except when he thought we weren’t around, and he called her, “Sweets”), it was clear, in a hundred different ways, that they loved each other deeply.

On the day of his funeral, I escort my grandmother down the aisle and past his casket where we say our goodbyes, and afterwards, out to the car; with her gloved hand gripping mine like a vice. There are lots of tears, but my grandmother sheds none. Until the funeral is over and we’re loaded in the vehicles, headed for the cemetery; Mary in the passenger’s seat of Aunt Wing’s car, me in back, and my Aunt Wing, solemn in solidarity with her dearest friend, behind the wheel.

As the lead car, we sit there in the silence, waiting for the hearse that carries my grandfather, parked directly in front of us, to get going. I hear a noise, like a storm blowing in, like sorrow itself breaking; a low rumbling, slowly rising to become a wail. And for about 45 seconds, my grandmother does something she rarely did – she cries; a deep, messy, guttural sound of sheer mourning. Head in hands, chest heaving, but so little sound coming out.

Sitting behind her in the car, I rub her back and comfort her. And suddenly, like a summer squall, it's over. After a minute or so of silence, she sits upright, takes a deep breath and says, "I'm OK." I hand her a tissue. She dabs her eyes, squeezes my hand, which is on her shoulder, and she informs my Aunt Wing that she's ready. And she is.

At the reception, held in the church basement, there's an endless parade of people I don't know, but who my grandfather, over the years, has helped, and who want to share their "Olden Moore" stories with my grandmother. There are stories of leaky roofs he repaired for free, the bag of groceries he'd left someone, and of him accompanying a man to request release of the body of his son who had been killed by the police.

I learn of the deep reservoirs of my grandfather's courage, about his quiet heroics and generosity of spirit, and while my grandmother loves hearing the stories – some of which are also new to her – she isn't at all surprised about the man he was. I'd wanted to do something to honor him at the service, but knew that my job was to be my grandmother's right arm, so it's at the reception that I make my tribute; I play and sing Dan Fogelberg's *Leader Of The Band*:

The leader of the band is tired, and his eyes are growing old.

But his blood runs through my instrument, and his song is in my soul.

My life has been a poor attempt, to imitate the man,

I'm just a living legacy, to the leader of the band.

I finish, and there's silence, except for the sound of soft sniffles. Then, someone breaks the quiet with clapping, and instantly, the room explodes with applause. But I don't acknowledge. It's clear to me that while they appreciate my performance, that this outpouring

of gratitude is for him, the leader of the band. Instead, I put down the guitar and join in the clapping. The mood is noticeably lighter after. The stories get funnier and I remember someone putting on music; Al Green's *Let's Stay Together* is playing in the background.

It reminds me of a private moment between my grandmother and grandfather, where I caught him standing behind her, with his arms around her waist, and crooning in her ear, in Al's soulful timbre, "*I – I – I – I am so in love with you, whatever you want to do, is alright by me...*" Her, pursing her lips to keep from smiling, then swatting his arm, saying, "Olden, get on out of here." The memory does something powerful for me.

I retake my seat next to Mary, who turns, places her hand on the side of my face and looks at me intently, lips together and eyes moist. There's a hint of a proud smile that tells me just how much she appreciates my tribute. After a minute, she pats my cheek, lightly touches my chest above my heart, then resumes receiving her guests. I stay by her side the rest of the day, but other than moral support, I'm not needed. As usual, she takes care of others and manages her own grief at another time, in another way, in private.

Later that night, we're back home and all the guests are gone. There's the familiar buzzing in the background; of both radio and TV, of laughter and petty arguments, of clanging in the kitchen and someone yelling to get the phone. Of family. I start a fire in the fire pit, always my grandfather's job, and there we sit, out in the backyard under the stars, just me and Mary. Neither of us says anything. We don't have to. I just hold her hand.

My Girls

31. Assurance

My sisters, who were out of foster care, were at my granddad's funeral. The following afternoon, we got together and went to Burger King; my sister Josie bringing her young daughter along. It was at that Burger King that we talked about all that had transpired in their lives after I left. They told me how they'd been abused and neglected. We talked about how they'd tried, on a few occasions, to leave; once even going to the police and telling them about the prostitution to which Josie and Necie were subjected; only to be brought back home in the back of a police car.

This was the second time they'd been betrayed by our justice system. Once, when they were still little kids, I'd marched us all into a police station, showed them my scars, and told them about the physical abuse. They sympathetically listened, then exited the room. Thirty minutes later, they walked back in – along with Bernice and Joe. The police had called them, and since they'd both stated that my injuries were from falls, the officer apologetically told me that he had no choice but to let them take us.

This time, my sisters had hoped that telling about their sexual abuse would make a difference. It hadn't. It was a school counselor, in whom Josie had confided, who ultimately helped them arrange

a getaway. To keep them safe, their whereabouts were kept completely confidential.

We talked about me coming home to visit and discovering them gone, about me not being able to find them and how relieved I was to eventually talk to them. I cried as I confessed how guilty I felt for having left them, that I had no idea that it would end up that way, and that had I known, I would have returned to Birmingham immediately. Once again, I'd failed them.

We sat together in this familiar pain, as we'd done so many times before, and they did what they'd always done; care for me as only they could. Amidst their own tears, they confessed that this knowledge – that I would return if I knew – was the reason for their pact; they agreed to hide the truth from me.

According to them, they each did it for their own reasons: Josie, because she was afraid of what might ultimately happen between me and Joe, Crystal, because she needed to believe it was possible to escape that place, and Necie, because she loved me and wanted me to have a good life. I could not have asked for better sisters.

They told me, in detail, about how quickly things devolved between my brother and Joe Sr., with me no longer there to provide stability, and with Joe Jr., who had every bit of his father's temper, refusing to endure even a fraction of what I had. At the girls' encouragement, he left one night, and as soon as he was able, both he and his best friend joined the Marines.

The girls' time in foster care, and away from Bernice and Joe, would turn out to be the best thing that could ever have happened to them.

It gave them the chance to be little girls; to have their biggest concerns be the boy they were crushing on and whether he liked them back. They were in a place called the King's Ranch; a faith-based foster home for at-risk kids that was far ahead of its time anywhere—let alone the South.

There, along with their deliberately racially integrated group of foster-siblings (and foster-cousins in two other homes), they attended school, did chores, had family meals, went to dances, and learned everything from horticulture to pottery, from writing poetry to riding horses.

Being there was, by far, the most normalcy they encountered in their entire childhoods, and far more than I, despite my trying, had ever been able to provide. And this, more than anything, gave me comfort; reminding me of what Mary had said about God not being cruel. There, over family dinners, they held hands while saying grace, then all eight kids launched into stories about their day; interjecting and interrupting – as siblings do.

Necie and Crystal were in a home together. Josie, already pregnant by the time they'd escaped Bernice and Joe, went to a different home that was better equipped to care for both her and her unborn child. Sitting there laughing over burgers, fries and shakes, it did me a world of good to see that their spirits remained unbroken and that joyfulness (and silliness) remained their default.

On my way to drop them off, the Pointer Sisters' *Fire* came on the radio and they all yelled, "Turn it up!" *Fire* was one of many songs we'd sing along to when the girls were little, and so there we were, joining in with Anita Pointer as she sang, "I'm riding in your car..."

For my part, I sat there behind the wheel, looking at them in the rearview mirror as they hammed it up – *“But my heart stays cool... well, Romeo and Juliet!”* And as I did, Mary’s words from that Christmas echoed in my mind. “They’re going to be OK,” she’d said. And she was right; they were. “When your mama came and took you,” she continued, “All I could do was put you in the good Lord’s hands.” I remembered her saying that I needed to trust they’d be taken care of the same way she’d had to trust that I would be.

“God was faithful then,” she said with absolute assurance, “And you can bet that God’ll be faithful now.” This was Mary’s own take on the *Serenity Prayer* (“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”) For her, however, it was more like, *“Grant me the courage to do the thing that needs doing, and the trust to know you’ll finish whatever I can’t.”*

My sisters and I reminisced about them as little girls, how different the three of them always were, and how I thought of them as young *Charlie’s Angels*: Josie, strong and headstrong, capable of besting any boy in school and banging out twenty one-armed pushups with each arm in under a minute; Necie, so beautiful that people stopped mid-sentence when she walked by and a heart that always felt too gentle for this world, and Crystal, whip-smart, willful and capable of doing anything she set her mind to.

Much more like triplets than regular sisters, people even referred to them together – *Josie-Necie-Crystal* – as if it was one name. I often imagined them as a Saturday morning cartoon – *The Beauty, the Brains and the Brawn* – a trio of crime-fighting sleuths and kick-butt mystery-solvers.

They talked about times from when they were little girls; how I took them out and taught them how to ride the bus, the time we “camped out” and I cooked hotdogs and beans in the can, on an oven rack, over a circle of stones, and the time I took them and my brother Joe to the circus.

In everything from teaching them to fold their clothes and put them away in shelving I’d made from cardboard boxes to us getting on our knees to say our nightly prayers, most of what I did for them was simply copying what Mary had done for me. In every way I could, I tried to envelop them in the same warmth that had nurtured me, and pass on to them the same sense of inherent worth that I’d been given.

Like Little Joe, Necie and Josie have since passed away; Joe at 40, Necie at 39, and Josie at 48. After Necie’s passing, I made it a point to get Josie and Crystal together once a year, if I could, since they were living on opposite coasts; Josie in Atlanta and Crystal in San Francisco.

One highlight was the trip where they met me in New York, and while there, the three of us, along with Steve, my best friend and “found family”, as Mary would have called him, all got dressed up, the girls, in glittery dresses, and went to see *The Color Purple* on Broadway. Despite Josie needing to do dialysis at night, it was a wonderful experience, and they’d both describe it as the trip of their lives.

We remembered Necie on that New York trip and carried her in our hearts with us everywhere, with constant references to “Necie would have loved this” or “That reminds me of when Necie...” Crystal even had a dream where Necie assured her that she was,

indeed, still with them, and always would be. She promised to send her and Josie a sign, and according to them, she did.

These were my girls, and like the sentiments expressed in the Temptations' song, just being around them made me feel good. In a different world, with a different childhood, they could have – each in their own way – changed the entire world, as each of them – in their own way – changed mine.

Beneath a Western Sky

32. Celebration

*“When I left my home and my family, I was no more than a boy, in the quiet of a railway station, running scared. Laying low, seeking out the poorer quarters where the ragged people go.” – Simon and Garfunkel, *The Boxer**

Norman, in spite of its relative flatness, like much of Oklahoma, was a beautiful place. Clean, quaint and friendly, it was what we imagine every college town to be like. Houses freshly painted and lawns lovingly cared for; smoke rising from chimneys at the start of football season. Trees that formed lush canopies over the streets in summer and that were aglow with color in autumn; my favorite time of year.

Frost on pumpkins and an elaborately decorated downtown during Christmas season. With its 100,000 residents, there was far more to Norman than the university, but the campus was the town’s crown jewel. Hedge-lined paths cut their way through clusters of brick buildings, the color of the red clay from which they were made. Ivy-covered walls and shady park benches, statues, fountains and historic plaques, manicured ovals bursting with color from bulbs that required constant replanting.

And then, there was the climate. For someone who likes extreme weather, Oklahoma was a dream. Heat, snow, hail, and fog; all of it could happen in a single season. And lord, the rainstorms – it

wasn't just the wind that came sweeping down the plains. "If you don't like the weather in Oklahoma," the saying goes, "Wait a minute".

I know that the college experience is a highlight in most everyone's lives, but for me, those memories are particularly salient. After such a truncated childhood, college gave me the opportunity to be a young adult, as opposed to shouldering the full adult responsibilities I'd carried since I was a pre-teen.

I got to join the caravan of thousands down to Dallas for the OU/Texas game, and ski over spring break in Colorado. I nurtured my spiritual growth in groups like Intervarsity and the BSU, and became one of the first full-fledged African American members of my college church.

I was named "Biggest Male Square" and Lori James, "Biggest Female Square" in the *Hip to be Square* dance contest she talked me into entering, and my friends Ron (Native American), Jon (Euro American), and I, as a team named "Neapolitan", won the men's 3-on-3 volleyball championship.

I went for long runs in the dead of winter and had a wonderful experience working for the OU landscaping department (and got to drive one of those "Flying Cushmans" around campus) in the heat of summer. I ate cheap food on Campus Corner and on St. Patrick's Day, had the obligatory green beer at O'Connell's.

I made deep and lasting friendships that took me to small towns all over Oklahoma – from Ardmore to Claremore, from Broken Bow to Broken Arrow. Those same friends not only embraced me unconditionally; they made sure that their families and home towns

did the same. Each year, I got the pleasure of spending Thanksgiving (my favorite holiday) with the families of my friends, and without exception, I was welcomed and treated like I'd grown up there.

My sophomore year, I lived directly across the hall from the guy who'd become my best friend, Jeff Samstad, who shared a room with his childhood friend, Ron, who was in Navy ROTC and who was best friends with Joe, also in ROTC. Though I was both the only non-Anglo and non-Oklahoman in the group, the four of us were inseparable, and we each had special connections with each other, which is probably what made us such a strong group.

Despite our respective busy schedules – Ron and Joe in ROTC, Jeff on the gymnastics team and me, both working and running track – some version of our foursome ate dinner together every evening in Cate cafeteria. One night, I was awakened at 2 AM by the three of them banging at my door. Joe had decided that we should venture out into what was turning out to be a massive snowstorm, and walk nearly a mile to the Burger King on Campus Corner that stayed open 24 hours.

I, of course, simply got dressed and went along, like I was being asked to borrow a quarter. The experience of roaming through an entire campus covered with 12 inches of virgin snow, the streetlights aglow, was incredible. For Halloween, Ron came up with the idea that we should dress as the “Fruit of the Loom” guys, and we spent weeks making costumes that won us first prize, and our picture in the *Oklahoma Daily*.

I got to be in a wedding party in Bartlesville, drive a tractor in Tahlequah; and learn to water ski on Broken Bow Lake. I “cruised

the strip” (drove up and down the main drag along with a parade of other teenagers in cars) in Mena on Saturday night, I saw Henryetta’s newly installed (and only) stoplight, ate at Boxcar Willie’s in Poteau and Eskimo Joe’s in Stillwater, and helped put up Christmas decorations in Yukon.

One time, I and my fellow RA’s (resident advisors) Paul, Dedee and Sarah, all decided to ditch everything and drive three hours down I-35 to Dallas to ride roller coasters at Six Flags. We drove back that same evening in Sarah’s convertible VW, with the top down, a sky full of stars and *Simon and Garfunkel’s Greatest Hits* filling the air.

When it got to *The Boxer*, I remember leaning back, taking in the scope of the galaxy above me, and letting the words wash over me. I could acknowledge that I, like the boxer himself, carried the reminders of every blow I’d taken, and still, the fighter remained. But that was only part of the story. All my life, I’d also been met with love as vast as the stars overhead, and that recognition, in that moment, brought me an almost unfathomable peace. I can still feel it today.

My time in Norman flew by quicker than I wanted, and before any of us knew it, the topic of every conversation was, “What are you doing after college?” I’d encouraged Mary, who was still grieving my grandfather’s death, to not take on coming out for the festivities, so I opted to save the money and not go through commencement. I didn’t walk the stage, but that spring, I became the first of the Moore family to officially graduate from a university.

Mary sent me a card with \$500 – a huge sum for her – along with explicit instructions to “spend every dollar of it on something I really

wanted, but didn't, in the least bit, need," and to report back to her what I spent it on. She told me it was important to always stop, appreciate, and celebrate, when we'd accomplished something extraordinary, and that given all the "toils and snares" in my path from there to here, that this certainly qualified.

"Even the Good Lord," she said, "After creating the world, stopped and pat his own self on the back, saying, 'It is good.'" And of course, she told me the same two things she's told me for as long as I can remember, even before the days we were getting on our knees to say our evening prayers; that she loved me and was, in her words, "as proud as could be."

Oklahoma, and its wonderful people, had been good to me, so I left with deeply mixed emotions and more than a hint of sadness. My last week as a student, I attended an assembly on the North Oval, along with thousands of others. They concluded the festivities with the *OU Chant*; a somber and reflective Gregorian-styled song, sang while holding one finger in the air; an expression of unity:

O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A

*Our chant rolls on and on! Thousands strong join heart and song in
alma mater's praise. Of campus beautiful by day and night; of colors
proudly gleaming Red and White,
Beneath a western sky, OU's chant will never die. Live on University.*

It somehow summed up the deep feelings of affection I had for this place; this setting of my coming of age. The realization of my good fortune settled over me like the blanket Mary had brought me home in, touching me deeply, and by the end of the chant, my eyes were wet. But as I looked around, I realized that I was far from the only one.

PART FOUR

What's in Our Hearts

33. Empathy

“Two thousand miles I roam, just to make this dock my home...” – Otis Redding

San Francisco is, undoubtedly, one of the most beautiful cities in the world; seven square miles of steep hills and luscious valleys, surrounded by both bay and ocean, crosscut by cable cars and streetcars.

With its iconic bridges and Golden Gate Park, with skyscrapers dotting a landscape of pastel-colored buildings and Victorians, with the sound of foghorns and the rumble of the mighty Pacific, the city, in all its gleaming glory, was nothing short of breathtaking. I knew none of this, really, when I decided to go. In fact, besides the Rice-A-Roni commercials (“The San Francisco treat!”), I essentially knew no more about it than I had about Norman, Oklahoma.

All my life, I'd intended to be a doctor. I'd always had a deep desire to help people, and medical professionals, through everything from the lifesaving care I'd received to the compassion in their eyes, bolstered my resolve to do the same for others. Over my college years, however, I had a number of experiences that, while only strengthening my desire to be a healer, challenged me to rethink what that should perhaps look like.

One such inflection point was the time I and another Resident Advisor performed first aid on a student who had slit his wrists while soaking in the bathtub. He was found by his suitemate, who'd returned early from a party. Thankfully, the student survived, and once the ambulance came and took him away, we cleaned up the blood, got his room situated and spent time with his badly shaken friend.

In the moment, I was immensely grateful that I'd known what to do, medically, to help save his life. That was very gratifying; something I knew I'd want to continue to learn for the rest of my life. But once things quieted down, what stayed with me and compelled me was a desire to understand the despair that ultimately leads someone to this place, and how we can help people avoid it.

I knew this student. A freshman, he was quiet and sensitive, but not unfriendly, and it was easy to see myself in him. In fact, had things gone differently in my life – if I hadn't had Mary – I'm certain the despair that had overwhelmed him would also have come for me, and far sooner.

I visited him the next day and though he was initially embarrassed, we began to talk; both about his life and mine. In the process, we discovered that despite having such different upbringings, him, from a suburban Euro American family, we shared so many of the same struggles and traumas. Over time, I'd find this to be true for most of us. I also did a stint as a student volunteer at the hospital.

We discovered that I was good at working with frantic family members, especially young mothers and fathers. I could calm them down and be with them, answer their questions as best I could, advocate for them and render them care. In the same way that

some people are able to avoid panicking at the sight of blood, turns out, I could remain calm in emotional crisis; another thing I was surprised to discover I'd gained from my ordeal at Bernice and Joe's, while, at the same time, tapping into a quality of compassion not unlike what I'd seen so often exhibited in the Moore household.

But perhaps most telling was when Barb, who was engaged to Mark, suffered a brain aneurysm at a social function, collapsed, and was rushed into surgery. While many of us had dealt with the loss of older relatives, as 19 and 20-year-olds, we were ill-prepared to face the potential passing of one of our peers. Amidst muted tones and awkward silences, the crowd dissipated.

Late that night, I found myself lying in bed wondering if Mark was OK. I felt self-conscious and didn't want to intrude, but I asked myself my go-to question – *WWMD* – what would Mary do? And I knew she'd risk making an effort that might not be appreciated over neglecting someone in need. I got dressed, walked to Walker Tower, the dorm where he was living, bought a soft drink from the vending machine in the lobby, and timidly knocked on his door at 2 AM.

When he opened the door, all I could think to say was, "I, um, brought you a Coke..." ("Idiot!" I say to myself, "Is that the best you can do?") First, Mark looked at me, utterly stupefied, then he let out a bark of a laugh, pulled me into a hug, and sobbed. I stood there holding him until his tears ran out, and I knew that, despite my non-eloquence, I'd made the right call. And Barb? She not only made a full recovery, but when she and Mark married, I was included in their wedding party.

Experiences like these left me feeling both immensely fulfilled and, at the same time, unsettled. Throughout my life, I'd never wavered in terms of how I saw myself contributing to the world. I never had visions of being a sports icon or movie star. I had no dreams of power or fame. All I wanted was to make real human connections with people in a way that made their lives better. And I'd never envisioned any other way of doing this than as a physician. I'd taken biology and anatomy in high school, had been pre-med in college, and had already taken the MCAT. But here I was second-guessing myself.

Looking back, exploring ministry as a vocation shouldn't have been such a surprise to me. I had, after all, been ordained a deacon at 10 years of age, and I was the first member of what might have been the first church in Birmingham founded with the explicit intention of being interracial; one small way of helping heal the city's soul.

It was my deep attraction to humanitarian spirituality that had compelled me to engage in all manner of social activism from my middle school years forward, including at OU, where, for some reason, I'd been drawn to psychology as a major. And that was all before reflecting back on my upbringing in post-Civil Rights-era Birmingham and the legacy of ministers like my grandfather, who'd put out the call to Martin in the first place.

I remember calling Mary to talk this through with her. "I feel confused," I confess, without preamble. "About what?" she asks, and I answer, "What did I always want to be when I grew up?" "I understand," she says. "How can you possibly understand when I

haven't even told you what the problem is yet?" I reply in an exasperated tone.

"Now, don't you go getting smart with me – you're not too big for me to put you over my knee," she quips, with a smile in her voice. "Yes, ma'am," I say in response, trying to keep the smile out of mine. She then told me I was asking the wrong question. "All those times you said you wanted to be a doctor? When someone asked you why, what would you say?" "To help people," I replied immediately. "That's your calling right there," she told me. "Being a doctor ain't but one way to do that."

I found myself thinking back to how I'd seen her interact with people, how she remembered every illness of every relative of every person in our neighborhood. "And how's Miss Winnie doing after her stroke?" she'd say to the Greek owner of the local market she frequented, referring to his mother.

I remember watching his eyes light up in appreciation, as he gave us the update. "I hear your grandboy Richard is gonna be coming home from the hospital?" she'd ask the neighbor we passed on our way back from the store, and they'd stand and "visit" for a few minutes. "I just made up a batch of salve," she'd mention to Mrs. Pitts as we passed her house, her, out tending her roses. "I'm gonna stop by with some for Harold's arthritis." "I'll have the kettle on," Mrs. Pitts would reply.

"I think you'd be the best doctor in the world," Mary then said over the phone. "You're smart enough to do anything you want. But what's in your head ain't your greatest gift. It's what's in your heart. She quoted from 1 Corinthians 13 (*If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a noisy gong or a*

clanging cymbal”), and she said, “Now, all that love in your heart, that’s where you’re truly blessed. You figure out how to share that with the world and you won’t go wrong.” When I hung up, I was no longer either unsettled or confused.

I thought back to *Dock of the Bay*, my earliest childhood memory, and how Otis sang, “I can’t do what ten people tell me to do, so I guess I’ll remain the same.” But clearly, Mr. Redding hadn’t met my grandmother. Because one of Mary’s greatest qualities was never making people feel like she was telling them what to do. She met me, as she did everyone, with empathy, and in doing so, she gave me the freedom - and the courage - to change.

“You’re not letting anybody down,” she’d added before I hung up, once again, reading my mind. Though I wasn’t even conscious of it, so much of my inner conflict was over wanting all those who’d helped me become the man I’d become to feel that their faith in me was justified. Mary helped me realize that it already was.

At the encouragement of a mentor at the BSU, I was one of a group of twelve graduates, and the only African American in the group, to apply to and be accepted into the same Southern Baptist seminary. That’s how I ended up in northern California; a place I’d been intimidated by only a few years prior.

I’d long heard people refer to California as “the land of fruits and nuts”, but I actually had no real idea what that meant; that “fruits” was pejorative for gays and that “nuts” was anyone who approached life differently. But it didn’t take long for both me and the folk who moved out with me, most of whom were native Oklahomans, to get the gist.

Immediately, our sense of smell was overwhelmed by the scent of sage and marijuana, incense and patchouli. The sounds of drumming circles and reggae, gay anthems and Fillmore jazz filled the air. Everywhere we looked was a dizzying array of humanity on display; people of every shape, gender, color and hue; dressed every way imaginable; from tie dye to business suits, from Birkenstocks to biker leather.

I found it exciting and a bit dizzying, in an “opening night at the county fair” kind of way. I recall thinking of that line from the song *San Francisco*: “You’re going to meet some gentle people there,” and how true that was.

Our tour of the city took us through the Castro, and I remember us being rendered speechless at the sight of this young, 19- or 20-year-old waifish guy walking down the street in nothing but black leather hot pants and a pair of angel wings, his hair cut short, and his features etched by grim determination. Responses from my fellow seminarians ranged from nervous laughter to snickers. But what I felt was a jumble.

On the one hand, I was hit with a profound sense of sadness that, in that moment, throughout the entirety of the United States of America, there were only a handful of tiny neighborhoods, all tucked away in a few of our largest cities, where anyone could even dare express their authentic self. I stood there watching him, his walking down the street dressed as a sexy angel, as much of an affirmation of his right to exist as Mary’s visit to the segregated department store café in the 1940s was hers.

He walked slowly, as if it had taken effort to gather his dignity around him; the rigidity with which he held his head high, the only

evidence of the many blows, both metaphorical and physical, he'd endured in order to become the person who could wear those wings. And that was before thinking of all those who'd endured similar things, but who hadn't survived. I found myself awed by this one person's courage and commitment to self-affirmation, and inspired by these "gentle people" who'd created this safe harbor, one where anyone and everyone could simply, be.

Together, they reminded me of everything from the home Mary created to the qualities she'd sought to foster in me to the individuals who'd been my saving grace all along the way. Over time, I'd realize that empathy was the common denominator—a force powerful enough to change the course of not just the lives of those who cultivate it but of entire cities and societies—and that this, helping to heal our collective soul, was something so much of my life prior had prepared me to do.

It was there on that August late afternoon, with the Castro Theater sign acting as a lighthouse beacon, that I finally understood what Mary had meant when she said that what's in our hearts is our greatest gift. San Francisco, with all of its astounding beauty and delightful lunacy, its unbounded inclusiveness and potent authenticity, touched me like no place I'd ever been.

Driving through the remainder of the city that evening, fog rolling in, I was hit by a realization so powerful, my breath hitched. It felt like arrival, like I, someone who'd never really felt like they truly fit, had finally found that place where I could grow into the person I was destined to become, and to have that person celebrated.

And like a prophecy, that would turn out to be true. The potency of Mary's prayers had, yet again, been revealed, and their answers

made manifest. Later, it would dawn on me that this, simply being happy and being myself, is what she'd always wanted for me, and what she'd always hoped I'd find. The same thing she wanted for everyone, from my trans cousin Emma Jean to my Anglo Aunt Diana to all her family, neighbors, and friends.

Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary was in Mill Valley, just north of the bridge it was named after, and off Seminary Drive, the freeway exit named after it. The town itself was one of a string of picturesque hamlets that lined the edge of the land mass known as Marin County, sandwiched between the bay and the ocean.

I quickly developed the habit of heading down to the water to think. I loved it most in the rainy season, when I'd sit out on a park bench, under my umbrella, journal in hand. One evening, I was down there sitting, writing and thinking, when a car drove by. Through its window, I could hear the familiar strains of Otis' (*Sittin' On*) *The Dock of the Bay*." And there I was, sitting on a literal dock, by that very same bay.

I couldn't help but smile.

Our Great Work

34. Calling

I made it through college with very little in the way of illness. Besides medication for epilepsy and needing the occasional infusion of platelets, I led a completely normal life.

Early in, on one of my visits to the hematology clinic, I recognized a boy from my large psychology class. Him, also recognizing me (I was the only African American in the class and he, the only one with crutches and leg braces), we exchanged rueful smiles, like two people waiting for the dentist chair. I walked over and introduced myself and he, who I'll call James, and I, became easy friends; a kind of foxhole brothers.

James' condition was far more serious than my own. I was there to stay well. He was there, trying to stay alive. He had advanced hemophilia, which meant that he missed more classes than he attended. Yet, he remained undaunted. For me, my only hospitalization during college was my senior year. I'd gotten a respiratory infection that turned into pneumonia, which, by then, I'd had more times than years I'd lived. I was on antibiotics, but didn't want to be hospitalized.

Then, before I knew it, I'd dropped fifteen pounds and was too weak to get out of bed. They admitted me, but no one was sure why I seemed to be getting so much worse, so fast. At one point, they even isolated me in my room, with a warning on the door that I was likely infectious.

This was in the mid-to-late eighties, and I remember a young, mask-wearing doctor, with nervous eyes, coming in to discuss concerns about a new disease called AIDS. The test came back negative, but because of the symptoms and a history of blood transfusions, they were taking precautions. The pneumonia cleared up, as it always had, and eventually, I was released. But before I was discharged, they mentioned a puzzling finding from my blood work – in addition to the low platelets, my white blood cells were abnormally high.

I, however, didn't give it much thought. I felt fine and honestly, had done this dance so many times that little fazed me. I was far more concerned about my friend James, who himself had recently been admitted. After losing consciousness due to bleeding in the skull, he'd been rushed in, and due to his many blood transfusions, was placed on the same "potentially infectious" ward as me.

There exists a few rare individuals with so much joy inside them, it can't help but spill out on everyone who's nearby. James was always one of those people. I stopped by his room and leaned in; relieved to see him sitting up and doing well. He was with his doctor, so I gave him a silent salute and a wave from the door and he gave me a broad smile and two enthusiastic thumbs up. That would be the last time I'd see him – smiling like he had not a care in the world – and is how I remember him, today.

A few years, one graduation, and a California move later, that high WBC count from college would rear its head again. I'd gotten an errant elbow to the chest while playing flag football and the bruise simply wouldn't heal. In fact, the area became increasingly puffy and discolored. I finally went to the nurse, who immediately shipped me off to the hospital, and that's how the cancer was discovered.

I never actually told my grandmother what was going on; she'd already lost Ron, my grandfather and Naomi to the disease and I didn't want to worry her until I knew for sure there was something to worry about. I also didn't want her to try to travel, nor, quite honestly, to see me in yet another hospital bed. But she figured it out anyway; she said she had a dream about it. I remember her calling my room and telling me, "I don't worry about you, Rodney; from the moment you came into this world, I ain't never worried about what those doctors said about you."

In words that evoked Martin's *I've Been to the Mountaintop* speech, the night before his own death, she said, "There's something you need to understand – back when you were a baby, the Good Lord showed me in a dream that he's got plans for you. I done seen them, clear as day," she said. "You don't know it, but you've been in God's hands since the day you were born, and I know in my heart that he ain't finished with you yet."

That hospitalization was in early December, a few days before my birthday on the 7th, and I found myself thinking about times in my childhood when I'd spent them right where I was; in a hospital bed. Both my fourth and my seventh were hospital birthdays, but despite that, they're some of my best memories. On my fourth birthday, I'd just come out of surgery two days prior, so was confined to bed.

I remember waking up to the sound of people filing in; my grandma's familiar hand gently rubbing my forehead. And there my family was; my aunt Naomi holding a large cake with candles and decorated with a Choo-Choo train; complete with conductor. The cake said, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY RODNEY!" and as they sang, then propped me up to blow out the candles, what looked like the entire Children's Hospital staff packed into the room.

They cut the cake in the lounge and served pieces to everyone on the floor – the other kids who were patients, their families and loved ones, and the staff – doctors and nurses, receptionists, orderlies and custodians. I got to be the hero who fed everybody cake.

On my seventh birthday, I was in again. My family came, of course, but this time, they brought my friends Cameron and Kevin along. All us kids were excited because that was the day the hospital was having its Christmas celebration. Santa was making an early, special visit, just for us – the boys and girls at Children's Hospital!

In reality, it was a bunch of students from Southeastern Bible College, with one of them dressed in a Santa suit and the others wearing assorted hats, vests, and Rudolph noses. They were wonderful. A Santa's Helper came and wheeled each of us out to the lounge, which they'd decorated in a Winter Wonderland theme.

We couldn't sit on Santa's lap, so he came and kneeled in front of us, and distributed presents to each of us. When he got to me, Cameron and Kevin, jumping up and down, yelled, "It's his birthday today!", so Santa said, "In that case, I think you deserve TWO presents, what do you say, everybody?" The other kids cheered, and I got two presents.

From my earliest memories, I always found the men and women I encountered during my hospital visits to be extraordinarily caring, patient and kind. I remember the sandy-haired doctor who, after monitoring my heart, would place his stethoscope on my ears so that I, in turn, could listen to his, and the beautiful mocha-skinned nurse who wore her hair up high and had bangs that came almost to her eyes, and who we kids called the “lollipop nurse” – she gave you a lollipop every time you had to have a shot.

It was only much later in life that I’d recognize the miracle there; how in an intensely racially polarized Birmingham, this diverse group of men and women worked side by side, caring for a bunch of sick kids; with racism, prejudice and segregation never allowed to enter that sacred space.

After my grandmother’s call, I lay there thinking about the concepts of purpose and calling. I thought about my grandfather and Ron, about Naomi and Robert, and whether they’d gotten to complete the work they needed to do. My head wanted to say yes, but I couldn’t reconcile that with my own heart; which had never stopped missing them.

Then, a thought occurred to me: What if that work is not one big thing, but rather, an accumulation of small things; like the earthbound angels I’d encountered throughout my life? Could that be our great work? Is it possible that the weight of our lives could be tallied in kind words, generous gestures, and caring sacrifices? If so, then Olden and Ron, Naomi and Robert, had more than completed their work; they’d far exceeded it.

One of my granddad’s go-to sermons was *The Sheep and the Goats* – about how, when all nations are judged, we’ll be separated

according to our good deeds, or lack thereof, the way a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. “He’s gonna say to the people on his right,” my grandfather would tell me, until he, tired of me interjecting to ask why the good people get to be on his right and bad people on his left (me, being left-handed, this was important to me), amended it to, “He’s gonna say to the people on one side...” and I’d nod, approvingly. He’d continue, quoting Matthew 25:

“Then the King will say to those on his, ahem, one side, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

I lay there and thought on the lessons my grandfather tried to teach me. I remembered my friend, James, and how we never know which encounter with someone will be our last one. And I thought about my grandmother’s words about callings, and works and finishings. I felt I was finally beginning to understand a truth that all three of them had figured out long before me; that we can’t determine the length of our days – only what we do with them. Our great work happens today.

ME AND MARY

I remembered Paul McCartney, in an interview, saying that the song, *Let it Be*, was inspired by a dream. He was visited by his mother, who died of cancer when he was 14. And in a particularly troubling time in his life, she'd said to him, "It will be alright, just let it be." I found myself overwhelmed with gratitude for my own Mother Mary, who'd told me something similar.

He Already Knew

35. Bravery

“You going to eat that?” he asked me, flashing what I would later come to think of as his trademark “not-a-care-in-the world” grin; referring to the obligatory Jell-O cup they provided just after chemotherapy. I was nauseous, irritated and in no mood to deal with strangers, or Jell-O, so I wordlessly handed it to him, hoping they’d both go away.

He didn’t. In fact, he insisted we become friends. “Insisted” is actually not the right word – it’s more like he simply assumed we were fast friends from that first moment and acted accordingly. Kevin was, like me, a cancer patient. His blond hair had long ago fallen out, so he’d taken to wearing hats – the more ridiculous, the better. That day, he was wearing a Viking helmet, horns and all, as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

I asked him as bluntly as I could to please leave me alone, and he refused – saying that being “grumpy” (his word) “wasn’t going to make anything any better.” I swear – I truly hated him in that moment. Nevertheless, as he predicted, we became the best of friends, but it was more than that. It’s like some small part of our actual souls connected; much like guys in a war; which, in a sense, was exactly where we were.

His eventual passing left a vacuum in my core that was never filled; nor would I ever want it to be. Even in his dying, he urged me to not just pass through life, but to truly live it, in his words, “for both of us.”

Kevin was indomitably happy; a living picture of what it meant to “suck the marrow out of life,” and never one to feel sorry for himself or to shy away from the facts. One of his rare gifts was his ability to look tragedy square in the eye and never lose the twinkle in his own.

I remember him cranking up Kenny Loggins’ *I’m Alright* on the boom box he brought to chemo, and breaking into his best Mick Jagger imitation as he belted out, “*I’m alright, nobody worry ‘bout me. Why you gotta give me a fight? Why can’t you just let me be?*” He managed to get the whole room dancing.

Kevin and Mary never met in person, though he loved talking to her on the phone. She’d tell him “You’re my grandson, too,” which always made him feel good, no matter how he was doing, physically. She had the same effect on him that she did on me.

Despite my insistence early on that I wanted to be left alone, he refused to take no for an answer; knowing that for all my protests and complaining, I really needed a friend who wasn’t grossed out over vomit, who understood incontinence, and who would be empathetic without letting me feel too sorry for myself. Naturally, Mary loved him immediately.

Early on, Kevin was healthier, but then things switched; I was accepted into a clinical trial just as he made a turn for the worse. The treatments that, today, are showing efficacy against his type of

leukemia did not exist then, so Kevin opted for palliative care. But you'd never know this by him; good-natured and optimistic to the end. Except for that one evening. I'd stopped by to spend the afternoon with him and found him definitely in a mood – a combination of sullenness, frustration and defeat – all uncharacteristic for him.

Knowing that his sister and I would still have each other was important to him, so I was surprised when I finally hear him say, "I'm jealous of you and Karen." "Kev," I said, "You don't have anything to worry about. You're her hero. For god's sake, you're *my* hero. I'll never be able to take your place and I wouldn't want to." He looked at me and said, "It's not her I'm jealous about; it's you." Silence. I was stunned; standing there blinking dumbly.

"I love my sister and I've stored up a lifetime of memories with her. But the thing I regret most about dying, is all the things you and I won't get to do together; and somehow, that finally hit me today." Still, I said nothing. He eventually asked how I felt, but we both knew my answer ("I'm flattered") was so much less than the whole truth and nothing but the truth. It's really difficult to be less than fully honest while looking in the eyes of someone nearing their own death.

Yet for the life of me, I couldn't bring myself to say simple, beautiful, truthful things like "I feel the same way", or "I'm going to miss you so much". Or, simply, "I love you". It was a subtle lie, but it triggered an earthquake of inner conflict; as if I was betraying not only Kevin, but myself and the way I'd been raised.

I'd never known romantic love, because the brand of faith I'd found myself in declared that I could never love another guy. I accepted

that and was willing to live by that. But that wasn't the faith of my youth. I'd grown up being taught that any sharing of love that made us better was good. Because that's what love is for. But in that moment, I'd reached the crossroads.

Confronted with the reality of my love for this person who was leaving us, I needed to decide which faith path I'd walk. Kevin had never asked me for anything. But that night he did. His breathing becoming increasingly labored, he asked me to do one thing for him – he wanted the memory of a kiss from me to take with him. I froze – a deer caught in the headlights of a piercing gaze that was diminished none by the illness that ravaged his body.

Immediately, years of homophobic social conditioning descended upon me like an atmospheric pressure system, and instantly twisted what should have been a pure and beautiful gesture into something I needed to consternate over, rationalize, or justify. Though I realized – right then – how important this moment was, it was too much for my grief-saddled brain to handle.

So, there I stood, frozen; as if caught in a logic loop and all I could think about were zeros and ones. There I was, trying to figure out how to do a simple and beautiful thing, something I wanted so desperately to do, and for someone I would have done anything for; but make it look like I was doing it under protest.

I hesitated long enough that his sister walked in with a big bowl of popcorn and the moment ended. The three of us lay there with the movie playing, but only Karen seemed to be actually watching it. When I took off that evening, we were both unusually subdued. "See you later," I said, rubbing his bald head. "See ya," he responded, giving me half a smile. But his eyes weren't smiling. In

fact, I doubt if I've ever seen someone trying harder to hide their sadness.

He slipped into the coma we all knew was ultimately coming a couple of days later, and I was devastated. I wished beyond wishing that I could rewind the clock just 48 hours. On my way back from my own treatment, I was inspired to write a song I titled, *Goodbye, my friend*, and on my shift sitting with him, I brought in my guitar and played it for him.

The general message was that it's ok to let go; that as soon as I'm on the other side, I'd find my friend, we'd take up where we left off, and we'd have all those adventures we didn't have in this life. The song ended with me saying "I love you and I will miss you"; the very words that seemed to get stuck in my throat two days earlier.

I sat there in the waning evening light; tears flowing and machines beeping. The silence is interrupted by a scratchy, whispery voice that simply says, "Hey, asshole, you owe me a kiss..." Kevin had awakened. I gave him some water, and then gave him a peck on the cheek, followed by a kiss where I tried to express the breadth and depth of feelings I neither had words for, nor that we had time for. "Wow," I remember him saying, "I might actually consider forgiving you if you give me another one of those." So, of course, I did.

I remember sitting on the edge of his bed and holding on the way you would a loved one you thought you'd never see again, and at the same time, knowing in your heart that this was indeed the last time you'd get to see them like this.

For his part, he was the Kevin of old; full of life, eyes twinkling, and the life of the party. We called his sister, grandmother and aunt, and the four of us spent the evening with him laughing and being silly; him showing visible signs of weakness, but otherwise as endearingly obnoxious as usual. The five of us were so loud that the hospital sent us visitors home. I'm certain I've never seen Kevin happier than that evening. He died in his sleep that night. And I'll never forget him.

I called Mary to tell her that he'd passed. "Lord have mercy," she said, "I knew it was you calling to tell me this as soon as the phone rang; I just had a feeling." We talked for a while and I told her everything; about how he'd almost died without knowing how much I cared about him, about the kiss, everything. "You know he called me the other day, right?" she said, "He was worried that y'all had parted angry and that he might not get a chance to set things right. I told him that you were the jackass, not him."

"What?!" I exclaimed incredulously. "You hard of hearing, all of a sudden?" she said. "No ma'am," I mumbled. "Listen, Rodney, it's good that you're so cautious, but sometimes you're *too* cautious. You don't always get a second chance to make something right, so sometimes, you need to say it the first time. The Good Book says 'there ain't no fear in love because perfect love casts out fear'. The most important thing you can do is do a good job of loving the people God gives you to love."

I'd think a lot about that in the years to come – both about the people God had given me to love and about those, both within and beyond my birth kin, to whom I'd been given to be loved. From my early childhood in Birmingham onward, I'd been blessed by so

many who have already gone on, but who while here, were wonderful gifts to me, and who left an indelible mark on my soul. I'll forever carry them with me.

My grandmother finishes our sharing about Kevin by saying, "I'm just glad you got the chance to tell him, but for your sake – not his." "Why do you say that," I ask. "Because," she says, after a pause, "He already knew."

The City of Brotherly Love

36. Compassion

“These children ain’t got nobody,” she said, when I asked her why she was making so many biscuits. “I reckon the least I can do is help feed them.” We often think of the AIDS crisis as something that only happened in places like San Francisco, but that’s not true. By 1996, African Americans suffering with HIV had surpassed every other racial/ethnic group – including Caucasians. And at the time, it was, in almost every case, a death sentence.

According to the CDC, by December 31, 2000, even with the new medications, of the 774,467 persons who had been treated for AIDS, 448,060 had already died. This was especially the case in cities with large low-income, minority populations, like Birmingham. And in places like Birmingham, for much of that time, the fastest-growing HIV-positive demographic group was African American females.

Mary had seen a news story about the patients at University Hospital – the same one that had saved my life when I was born – and decided to do what little she could. She whipped up a dozen biscuits and sent them over for the patients – along with some of her homemade jam.

One might think, what good can a few biscuits do? Turns out, a lot. They were apparently gone in the time it took to serve them. They were large, so they cut them in half, along with a bit of jam on small paper plates. From what the nurse said, patients blinked uncomprehendingly; incredulous that someone's grandma had actually baked for them, especially when so many of their Bible-believing families had abandoned them.

Then, they tucked in, and before anyone knew it, many of them had eaten their first food in days. Before long, Mary was baking upward of five dozen biscuits a week, and not a one went uneaten. Ever practical, it was Mary's actions that pulled my head out of the clouds of theological academia and compelled me to get off the sidelines and do something about the here and now.

Having none of her extraordinary baking skills, I became a moderator for a support group for people with life-threatening illnesses. As someone who was intimately familiar with the rigors of patienthood, paired with my pastoral counseling training and the trauma-recovery work I'd been doing for myself, I was fairly well-positioned to help others through this kind of rocky journey.

One day, I shared with the group an exercise I'd stumbled upon when I'd had my earlier health scare. I'd been journaling, and ended up writing something I'd come to call my "I will never" list – a way of letting myself grieve things that I probably wouldn't get to do. My list ranged from experiential things like, "I'll never get to live in NY," to existential things; "I don't feel like I quite know who I am."

Sure, it helped me with acknowledging my feelings, but there was far more to it. The list gave me focus; helping me see through the haze and determine what was truly important to me. It seems

counter-intuitive, but it was facing dying that helped me truly embrace living.

It turned out that this was equally powerful for the group in many ways. First, owning the sadness stopped it from overwhelming all other aspects of life. Second, the process made us mindful of all that we still had. And part of what we still had was time. Those lists became guides; ways of clarifying what one most wanted out of life, and a challenge to not let it pass us by or fear hold us back.

The group, me included, started working to move as many things as possible from our “I will never” lists to our “I’ve already” lists. There were people who had parties, who took virtual trips, who went scuba diving, who started learning French, who tackled their dissertation and who changed their name. One person, an architect, set about designing an AIDS memorial, whereas another person had always wanted to have a bonfire at Ocean beach at sunset.

Our challenge to ourselves was to find a way to make some part of each item on our lists a lived experience; a memory, one that we’d share with others. That’s how I ended up recording an album; a project that never would’ve happened without my friend Spencer Nilsen, who produced it. And that, in and of itself, was an important lesson; none of us can do all we want to in life, alone, nor do we have to. There are people out there ready to help.

The title song, *Signs of Life*, summed up perhaps the most important lesson I’d learned in recent years; that each day, and what we do with it, matters. The bridge said, “*Sometimes, I let the bitter rob the sweet. And I let my soul get mired in defeat. But when I close my eyes, all around me are signs of life.*” This was the crux

for me; my early life had been wonderfully sweet and my latter childhood, cruelly bitter.

But as I looked deeper, I saw oh so much of the sweet; in the love that had been given to me by everyone from my siblings, who I would not have known had I not gone to live with Bernice and Joe, to strangers who would come to enrich my life so fully. The signs of life, once I learned to see them, were everywhere I looked; like poppies on a California hillside. Sometimes, it takes facing our own ending to recognize how powerful we truly are, and how, in the grand human story, there's a line that only our lives can write.

One evening, I received a call letting me know that Doug, both a friend and a member of the support group, had been hospitalized and would likely not live through the week. Turns out, he wouldn't last more than a couple days. I sat with him, along with others, and we were all struck by the contentment on his face. At one point, he leaned over to me and said, "Thank you." I ask what for; having no idea I'd done anything of merit for him. He looked at me, smiled, and said, "I've got no more 'I will nevers.'"

This was the early-90s; a half-decade into the AIDS epidemic. But for me, it wasn't until Doug's passing that I truly grasped the reality of what we'd already been doing to people for years. To our collective shame, funeral homes, caught up in rampant hysteria, were refusing to do the very thing they existed for, and churches, ostensibly for theological reasons, wouldn't hold memorial services for victims.

In response, I and others started calling everyone we could, and compiling a list of places that would treat these people we loved with the dignity they deserved. Two such places were Sullivan's

Funeral Home, which would care for everyone brought to them, and Most Holy Redeemer, one of the first – and few – congregations to launch a dedicated ministry to AIDS victims.

Over time, this would evolve into a ministry itself; organizing and conducting memorials, running interference when family members charged in and started making decisions for relatives they'd exiled, counseling and comforting the grieving and just being there with the dying as they embarked on this sacred journey.

I was reminded of Bruce Springsteen's song from the film, *Philadelphia*, about Andrew Beckett, played by Tom Hanks, a gay man dying of AIDS, and his fight for dignity and justice, and his once-homophobic lawyer-turned-friend, who helped him, played by Denzel Washington: *"I was bruised and battered, I couldn't tell what I felt; I was unrecognizable to myself. I saw my reflection in a window, I didn't know my own face. Oh brother are you gonna leave me wasting away?"*

For me, sitting with those courageous men and women as they faced this horrible disease and seeing the grace with which they faced it would do more for my soul than I ever did for theirs. Once again, I was reminded that often, the bravest among us are either in hospital beds or making them. No matter what AIDS took from those patients, they refused to let it win.

At the same time, Mimi Agers, a dear friend from seminary, would encourage me to take another surprising step into life. She got me to accompany her on her visits to death row inmates in San Quentin prison, which is where I met Terry Bemore. Despite knowing that he would never leave that ward alive, Terry was one of the most luminescent people I'd ever meet. With his quick mind and equally

quick smile, Terry exuded the serenity of a Buddha and the wisdom of a saint.

He would become a great friend, and over my months of visiting him and other inmates condemned to die, those men would challenge everything I thought I knew about how people ended up there. And like those suffering from AIDS, they would give far more to me than I, no doubt, could ever have given to them. It was through these experiences that I'd come to understand just a bit more about hope, faith and love; the secrets of Mary's greatness of character, and that I'd also seen on display in these lives so often cut short.

"You can't out-give God," I remember my grandmother saying. "The more goodness you give away, the more he gives you right back." And here, connected with these people on the perimeter of life, yet so full of what makes life precious, I saw this to be true.

The gifts they gave me would lead me to make three commitments to myself: 1) I would appreciate the life I'd been given; owning responsibility for making the most of it, 2) I would remember that every day is an opportunity to change an "I will never" into an "I've already," and 3) I'd strive to be the constant conveyer of kindness in the world that Mary always knew I could be; the kind that makes every city, "the city of brotherly love".

What We Leave Behind

37. Legacy

I don't remember who first thought of it, but it was Pat who made it happen. Perhaps my grandmother's most capable (and definitely her most determined) child, there is little that she has set her mind to that has not come to fruition. So if anyone could bring this entire family together to throw a big birthday bash for my grandmother, it was her.

Like Mary, Pat was a constant source of love and support in my life. Only a decade older, she was always far more "big sister" to me than ever "aunt." Starlet beautiful, with tan skin, Halle Berry eyes, and those high cheekbones that run in our family; she was something of a Renaissance woman. But growing up, she always had a way of cracking my otherwise serious demeanor and engaging me in silliness.

I remember once, when I was probably 11 or 12, her grabbing my book, tossing it aside, and pulling me up off the sofa. "Dance with me," she said. And there we were, traipsing around the living room of my grandmother's house, trying to copy the elaborate moves of the couple on the television, but that were far beyond either of us.

“Dip me like he did her,” she said, and given that I had no idea how to execute such a move, my attempt landed us both on the floor in fits of laughter. Turns out, it’s not as easy as the people on TV make it look. The most recent of my relatives to die, her loss is still fresh. But at the same time, she doesn’t feel “gone”. More like simply, “away”. Because here, within my own being, I can still feel her aliveness.

I can remember, with full clarity, the summer afternoon when she and four-year-old me stood on the curb hand-in-hand, patiently waiting for the ice cream truck, and discussing what we were each going to get. Or us swinging together on the porch swing, my legs too short to reach the floor, and Seals and Crofts’ *Summer Breeze* playing in the background. Or her pretending, along with me, that the floor she’d just mopped was my ocean.

Some mornings, the five of us, me, my grandmother, Pat, Don and Ron, would all leave the house together, bound for our respective schools. We’d cross busy Graymont Avenue, then Mary and I would veer off to the left, headed for Hill Elementary, where I went.

Don, Ron and Pat would continue on, with Pat dropping Don and Ron at Lincoln, the junior high school, before walking a few blocks further to Parker, the high school she attended. Those were fun times; lots of storytelling and antics, and the twins alternating between torturing one another and pestering Pat.

Fast-forward three decades, and we’re scattered across the nation. I, like my uncle Ron before me, was living in California, my brother Joe, in Atlanta. Joe agreed to host the party at his massive colonial style house, so the entire family, immediate, extended and grafted in, descended on his Gwinnett County home.

People came on planes, in cars and by bus; nearly a hundred of us in total. Pat's dream was to honor Mary while she was still living, rather than after she was gone. Which is exactly what we did. Two of my sisters and their kids were there, as was my mother and even Joe Senior.

There was lots of picture-taking, barbeque eating, game-playing, reacquainting and reminiscing. But for me, the highlight – and the mental picture I carry with me – is seeing my grandmother show those young'uns a thing or two about jumping rope; Kool and the Gang belting, "*Yahoo! It's a celebration!*" in the background. At 70 years of age, her spirit remained undiminished.

Some of my favorite family photos are from that gathering, and it feels very appropriate that it was held at my brother's house. He always worked hard to keep the family together; especially those who were in need, or in danger of getting lost. His big house was always full, and people, always around his table.

And Mary? It so fit her to have her birthday party morph into a family reunion. Nothing could've pleased her more; because nothing mattered to her more. Over a decade later, she'd have a stroke that would eventually lead to her passing, but on that day, and indeed, most every day, she lived a life where she held nothing back.

I saw her sitting away from the center of the action with a look that seemed equal parts wistful and proud. I went over to her, first pretending to sit in her lap – all 6'2" of me – before kissing her on the cheek, wrapping her small hand up in mine and slipping into the chair next to her for one of our talks.

As always, she told me how glad she was to see me and how proud of me she was. I asked her if she was OK. Picking up on the concern in my voice, she said, "I'm wonderful, Sweetheart. I don't think God has ever blessed anybody the way he has me."

I sat there thinking about the hardship that had characterized her life, and was amazed at how she looked at the same life, and saw one full of blessing. "I just wish your granddaddy, the children [referring to Ronald, Eddie Lee, Robert and Naomi] and your Aunt Wing was here with us." "They may not be there," I replied, pointing at the cacophony that was our family, "But they're here," tapping her heart, then mine. She patted my hand, gave me her patented pursed-lip smile, and said, "You always know what to say".

At one point, I asked her if she had any regrets. She nodded thoughtfully and said, "I think, maybe everybody does." But then, she said something remarkable; something that very few people who have walked this earth can truthfully say, "But every time the Good Lord gave me somebody to help, I did my best. That's one thing I don't have regrets about." There's a rare kind of serenity in that kind of faithfulness; in knowing that, in the ways that really matter, we've done our best with the life we've been given.

My big contribution to this gathering was contacting friends and people who'd known my grandmother, telling them what we were doing and giving them the chance to send a note. I had Pat photocopy the well-worn pages of Mary's fifty-year-old address book; the one with roses – all but faded – on the cover, and send the pages to me in the mail. Then, I got to work.

By that time, so many of her contemporaries had passed on, or were in homes for the elderly that my expectations were low; I

hoped for one or two responses. What came was an avalanche; not just notes, but cards and letters from far and wide. Among them, of course, were letters from Cameron and Kevin's grandmother and aunt, as well as one or two others from our street when I was a small boy.

Then, there was the family my grandmother had spent her career working for. They had three daughters; each slightly older than my grandmother's girls. Each of the daughters, referring to her as "Ma Mary", sent wonderfully heart-felt letters stuffed with photos of their kids and families, along with all manner of gifts. But perhaps most surprising was the letter received from the son of the insurance man who used to come by and visit with my grandmother.

I didn't know how to find him, so I'd sent an inquiry to the company that issued the policy and asked if they could forward. The son wrote that his father had Alzheimer's, but that those visits with Mrs. Moore over coffee and cake was one of the things he still recalled. He said that his father had gone on to become a committed advocate of equality and civil rights, and had passed those values onto his son.

My grandmother never had much in the way of money. She had no monuments or buildings named after her. She created no patents, won no academic awards and was never known beyond her family and friends. Her legacy was, and is, people – all the lives she touched and the family she created – both those born to her and those she just flat-out adopted. Sometimes life affords us very few choices.

But Mary, through the way she'd lived her life, had taught me an important lesson; one choice we all have is that of our legacy –

what we leave behind. When she shipped me off for Norman, she instructed me to look forward, rather than back, and to live up to the greatness she'd seen in me from the very beginning. To make her proud.

And by that point in my life, I'd gone beyond even the dreams held for me by those back home. I'd earned degrees and fought for social justice. I'd achieved modest but real success out in the world and had made good on my lifelong desire to help people. I'd gone from inner city classrooms to Ivy halls, from surviving on supermarket tips to working on societal problems. All of this was thanks to Mary. But for me, my accomplishments all paled in comparison to what my grandmother herself accomplished, because she started with so little. Whereas I had her.

I was taught that to whom much is given, much is required. And just as my grandmother said "nobody has ever been more blessed", I felt that no one had ever been given more than I'd been given in the personage of Mary Moore. Because of that, I could think of nothing more worthy than living a life that honored all that I received from her; both by the person I am and what I contribute to the world.

A decade or so later, immediately after Mary's funeral, we gathered at Pat's house, as a family, where my grandmother had spent her autumn years, surrounded by a gaggle of grandkids. And like we'd done all those years prior in Atlanta, we honored her. There was lots of picture-taking, barbeque eating, game playing, reacquainting and reminiscing.

Pat and I sat there watching this cacophony that was our family; my arm around her shoulder, her leaning into me, both our eyes moist with tears. But more than sadness, there was joy, because

ME AND MARY

of all the lives that had been indelibly shaped by this remarkable, unassuming woman.

There was peace, because we'd made sure to honor and celebrate her life while she was able to see it. And there was love. Lots of love. Because everywhere we looked, we saw reminders that Mary was still among us and that her legacy was strong.

When the Good Lord Says it's Time

38. Valor

Fall of 1997. I'm awakened in the middle of the night by a call from my sister, Crystal. She's at a phone booth and tells me that Mark Steven, her husband, is holding the kids hostage and that she only has a certain amount of time to return with his next drug fix.

At the time, Crystal is alone in Birmingham: Joe and Josie are in Atlanta, and Necie is visiting southern Mississippi, where she's considering moving. I tell Crystal, "You've got to get out of there. What are you going to do if he hurts one of the kids, and what are *they* going to do if he hurts you?" She pauses and says, "I'll call you back." She doesn't have a phone at home, so I have to wait to hear from her.

In the meantime, I call and give my grandmother the update. She says, "Now, I know you, Rodney," and if anyone can validly make that claim, it's her. "You're a worrier, just like me. But I learned a long time ago not to be worrying about things I can't do nothing about. It ain't nothing but a waste of energy," she says. "Instead, get your soul ready to act, when the Good Lord says it's time." What happened next made her words feel like a prophecy.

The call came a couple days later. Crystal and the five kids were in a battered women's shelter. Her husband had landed her in the hospital with an injury not unlike the one Joe inflicted on Bernice when we were young; a blow to the head. Only, instead of a two-by-four with a nail in it, Mark Steven had used a crowbar.

Crystal, realizing how much worse things could have been, came to a conclusion – she would not give him another chance to do that to her. Even all these years later, I'm awed by the depth of courage and fortitude she, all of 27, exhibited. In this, as in so many other ways, she'd prove herself to be Mary's granddaughter.

All the women in my family are extraordinarily powerful, and in the same way that Mary took off for an unknown Birmingham, on foot, no less, or, like Harriet led escaping slaves through unimaginable peril in their bids for freedom, Crystal set out with only her last paycheck from Taco Bell, the clothes on her and the kids' backs, and a promise from me that I'd be there for her in the same way I'd been when she was a girl. But this was a much bigger risk for her. She was the one leaping out of the plane.

Still, like her sisters who had taken similar risks, she'd realized that no life awaited her in that place, and so, she found the courage to embark upon a 2,400-mile cross-country journey to an unknown land with five kids, three of whom were under five. As far as she knew, nothing awaited her there – no job, no house, no nothing. But not unlike 16-year-old me taking off for the unknown that was Oklahoma, she knew that whatever she'd have to face in this new land couldn't compare to all she'd already survived.

At the time, I'd been in the San Francisco Bay Area for about a decade, and through my work as a minister and my engagement in

social activism, I'd cobbled together my own version of found family. And that great cloud of former strangers who were now fixtures in my life rallied around me in support; doing what family does. Tim Stanish, both mentor and father-figure, single-handedly found and helped me purchase a van in Birmingham over the phone. When I arrived at the airport, the guy from the car dealership was waiting for me. We introduced ourselves; I signed the papers and drove off. He took a cab back to the dealership.

After retrieving the van at the airport, I headed for the shelter, where I picked up both Crystal and the kids who would become so dear to me. This was only the second time I'd met the younger kids. The only other time was when I'd come to visit just months prior. I drove to Atlanta to see Josie and Joe Jr., then, when back in Birmingham, stopped by Crystal's house, where Necie and her young son were visiting.

In the same way that the balloon incident with my Uncle Sid is burned into my mind, this visit from their uncle is an anchor memory for them. They all remember me, their tall and lanky uncle, climbing out of the car and walking up to them with something wonderful in my hand – a dozen still warm Krispy Kreme donuts – a southern staple. Even now, in their minds, I owned a purple car; no matter how many times I tell them it was a rental.

I knew on that trip that if I valued my life, I wouldn't dare go to Birmingham without at least stopping in to see Mary, so I drove straight from the airport to Pat's house. When I got there, she had food already packed for our trip; tons of fried chicken, assorted sandwiches, potato salad packed in a large yogurt container, sliced carrots and celery packed in water, fruit, slices of individually

wrapped pound cake, and, of course, her biscuits, already sliced in half, buttered, and with jam.

I stayed only a few minutes; long enough to give her a cuddle and allow her to fuss over me; complaining that I was still too skinny. Neither she nor I spoke about why I was in Birmingham or why I couldn't stay longer. We'd already talked everything through long before I arrived. Silently, she gave me one final hug, before rubbing my back and shooing me out the door.

After loading Crystal and the kids in the van at the shelter, we picked up records from school, but didn't stop by their house for any of their belongings. Within hours of my having landed in Birmingham, I was headed out of town with a bunch of adorable, but nonetheless shell-shocked stowaways. We made one final stop; at a Walmart, where I bought a couple changes of clothes for the kids, drinks and snacks, blankets and pillows, a cooler, and a few games and toys to play with along the way. And we were off.

The Walmart I stopped by was the one where Don worked; out on HWY 78, near the old truck stop where Bernice worked when we were young. Like the truckers, we'd take HWY 78 to Memphis, then meet up with I-40.

Don was the only person in Birmingham, besides my grandmother, who I'd informed that I was coming or what I'd be doing. At the time, I didn't know if Mark Steven would try to come after them and hurt them as he'd threatened, so I kept the entire operation secret. But if there were two people in the world who I knew would never allow any harm to come to me, it was my grandmother and Donald.

Don guided me through the store, helping me find everything I needed, each of us pushing a basket. He helped me get through checkout, and get everything situated in the van; loading the cooler with ice, taking the packaging off the toys, etc.

When we were done, he pulled me into a hug, with a look not unlike the one Ron had given me all those years ago when I'd taken off for music practice by myself; an unspoken pact between brothers. This one said, "I'm proud of you." He then turned to my sister, hugged her, and looking her in the eye, said, "Mind your brother." Then, we were off.

I did most of the driving, from late afternoon through the night, and Crystal would drive for a few hours the next morning. We'd stop somewhere mid-day and let the kids run around and burn off some energy. One of those stops was at University of Oklahoma, where we gathered up a huge pile of fall leaves on the North Oval, before diving in and decimating it, leaves flying everywhere. Crystal and the kids also got to see the Grand Canyon (I stayed in the hotel room and slept) and we all went to Disneyland.

At the shelter in Birmingham, the kids, especially the younger ones, looked as if they were suffering from posttraumatic stress, and they likely were. I physically picked them up and placed them in the van; them almost in a daze and almost completely silent. So, my plan was to give them lots of good memories so that they would not associate this trip with the fear that they'd felt before leaving.

And in that sense, it worked; they don't recall actually leaving Birmingham. But they do remember going to Disneyland. And they remember the big pile of leaves, and watching *Anastasia* at a Norman movie theater while I napped in the van.

We arrived in San Rafael, California late Wednesday night, or more accurately, Thanksgiving morning. We collapsed everywhere in my postage stamp apartment and slept. And while the journey itself was over, both the adventure and the kindness of my family of friends was just beginning.

Cameron and Wendy had all seven of us over for Thanksgiving dinner that day. We got to their house mid-morning, just in time for waffles. They were the first people the kids met in California, and they could not have been more kind, caring and supportive. I, knowing that everyone was in good hands, spent most of that afternoon sleeping on the couch.

Mike and Heather let my sister and five kids stay with them for almost a month until I found them a place to live. And once I'd found a place, the people in my life donated a house full of furniture – everything from bunk beds to flatware. We were able to get the two older kids enrolled in school, but Mark and the twins were too young.

It was my friend, Bill Berry, a fellow minister at one of the local churches, who found space in their church's day care center for all three; along with a full scholarship for both Damon and Domanique; essentially, a three-for-one deal. My friends, Lisa, Mimi and Karen put together special gifts for the girls, and Brian, Scott and Bob did the same for the boys. Other friends gave new clothes, food, movie tickets; you name it.

The outpouring was incredible, and beyond anything my sister, in all her life, had ever seen. But me, over and again, I've been on the receiving end of so much grace, kindness and caring from everyday people of all ages and ethnicities, sexualities and

religious beliefs, across the political spectrum, and in every place I've lived or traveled. I remember hearing Enya's rendition of that old hymn, *How Can I Keep from Singing?* and me thinking, "I know what that feels like."

Crystal and the kids got a fresh start in California, and she took it. She became the night manager at a nearby Taco Bell and took on work with Art, my "adopted" brother, cleaning houses during the day. In the midst of working, raising the kids, etc., she also finished college, and would go on to become one of California's leading housing advocates.

And me? I got the chance to become an actual father and pass on the many things that Mary gave me to the next generation and through them, to the world. In one way or another, I've been trying to do that my entire life. When the kids were little, I remember them asking their mother, "Who taught you how to tie *your* shoes/fold your clothes/ride the bus?" And she'd always answer, "My brother." And each time, I'd think about the woman who'd taught me those same things.

Crystal, by summoning up the courage to get in that van, not to mention facing everything that would come after, would reinforce a lesson I'd already learned from Mary's example; how we all have fears, but the people who change the world are those who don't waste the spaces in between all the action. They gird their loins with valor, getting their souls ready for when the Good Lord says it's time.

The Big Visit

39. Virtue

Her entire life, my grandmother took care of others. From her own family, to the family she worked for, from the neighborhood kids who made her house a second home, to the quiet ways she changed the world, with every breath, she was a giver.

She had charged me to leave Birmingham and not come back; to go as far in life as I could go. And while I'd not reached the end of that destination yet, I wanted to invite her into the world in which I now lived; the world that she'd made possible. I hounded her for months to come for a visit, but she was deeply afraid of flying. She truly was one of those people who said, "If God had meant us to fly, he would have given us wings."

Everyone in the family was utterly shocked when she finally agreed – but even then, only after I offered to fly out to get her, accompany her by plane, and fly back with her. It took me three plane tickets to get her out to California, but it was worth it. People had heard me talk about Mary for years, so everyone wanted to meet her. And everyone I'd ever helped took this opportunity to thank her – the reason I was who I was – and went out of their way to do things for her.

Ninety-five percent white-identifying and one of the wealthiest counties in the world, Marin County is not all that dissimilar from the “over the mountain” communities where she’d ironed and cooked, cleaned toilets and made beds. Mary, who’d made her living as a domestic servant, was instead served hand and foot. She was manicured, pedicured, made over, massaged, and had her aura fluffed.

All her life, she was colored, female and an orphan, growing up in an era when this rendered her invisible, if not disposable. But in this place, she was anything but. She was taken to some of the finest restaurants in the area, and more than once, when the owner found out that this was my legendary Grandma Mary, they treated her like an arriving head of state. What I’d intended to simply be a chance for her to see my life, the people in that life had turned into a coronation.

We held a church concert in her honor; one with a number of songs she knew, including *O Mary Don’t You Weep*; a song my grandfather’s group used to sing and that was popularized by Pete Seeger; one of my musical idols, and I wove in Van Morrison’s *Have I Told You Lately*; a message from me to Mary. I remember being utterly amazed by the number of people who weren’t members of our church, but who came to celebrate her.

I had to go early, so my best friend and housemate, Bob Jackson, took on the responsibility of being her escort; Mary in her below-the-knee white dress decorated in large pink and green flowers, white shoes and veiled churchgoing hat. I’d find out later that she’d arrived to people waving banners and streamers and signs that said, “WELCOME, MARY!” “WE LOVE YOU” and “THANK YOU”;

like she was parade marshal or prom queen; complete with corsage and bouquet of roses.

At the concert, she met Sam and his wife, Nancy; both dear friends of mine. Sam was the senior pastor I'd worked alongside for years. There were any number of reasons why perhaps our partnership should not have worked. He was a white-identifying man, twenty years my senior, and who was from, of all places, Birmingham. But even more unlikely, we were from the same neighborhood.

Though separated by two decades, Sam had walked the same streets I walked, to and from my grocery store job. His family had patronized the same Gilmer's Drugs, where I'd eventually work, and he'd gone to Ensley high school; the same school my sisters attended. When he went there, the entire school identified as white; by the time they went, virtually no one did.

Nevertheless, Sam and I formed both a strong working relationship and friendship; no doubt, at least in part, because we'd been so shaped by the same place. In fact, some people had taken to calling us the "Birmingham Boys".

One of the things of which I'm most proud that we did together was hosting a concert to raise money for the rash of burned, historically black, Alabama churches in the early 1990s. The concert brought Marin's diverse spiritual traditions together; everything from a Native shaman and flautist to a New Age harpist, a Buddhist guitarist, a classical string quartet, two gospel choirs, contemporary sacred music, and a finale that combined everyone together.

I knew that Sam, who'd always insisted that Bible study was never a substitute for Bible practice, and who often said, "We're already

smarter than we are good,” and Mary, an ardent believer in letting our actions do the talking, would hit it off. In terms of ethos, they were cut from the same cloth.

She, upon meeting him, gave him her nice-to-meet-you smile, and looked him over as he held her small hand in both of his. Then, seeing something she'd hoped to see, she reached up and patted his cheek, saying, “Thank you for taking care of my boy.” After the concert, people waited in line to meet her, showering her with gifts, cards, and more chocolates than she could ever hope to eat.

By bringing her out, I'd wanted, just for a moment, for her to experience a world where she would be treated with the dignity and respect that she deserved. I wanted that to be my gift to her. In the end, the reality was so far beyond anything I'd hoped for. Mary started out life as far down on the ladder as one can get; not just the bottom rung, but the space below it. But here, in this place, in this time, she occupied the seat of honor.

I remember coming home from work, dressed in coat and tie, to find the house full. People, including one friend who's reaching the end stage with AIDS, crammed in the kitchen, Mary, apron on waist, stirring something at the stove. My friends, far more interested in her than they've ever been in me. And I couldn't be happier. I walk in just as someone is asking her a question. “Mrs. Moore,” they begin. “You can call me Grandma Mary, sweetheart,” she then says, “Everybody else does.”

I stand there, taking it all in, struck with the same wonderment that captivated me all those years ago, when I'd watched Aunt Naomi's back yard transform into a pond. I love seeing them getting fed, fussed over, and enveloped in that same familiar warmth I'd known

my whole life. I know, from personal experience, what a balm this can be. I go over and lift the lids of one of her pots, which, of course, earns me a swat (and which everyone in the kitchen thinks is hilarious), along with a look that's half smile, and half, "You know better than that."

She places a biscuit on a saucer, halves it, spreads jam on it, presses it and a napkin into my hand, turns me around, and points; wordlessly exiling me to my room to change. The entire time, she's explaining something to someone else. As I walk away, the smile on my face is irrepressible. I vow to cherish this feeling; what it's like having her here in my new life, mothering and cooking, feeding bodies and souls, loving on these people I now love, forever.

Though few of us realize it, we, by our day-to-day actions, are choosing the person we'll ultimately become. What a joy it was seeing, in Mary, the culmination of an entire lifetime of making such choices – of choosing kindness over cruelty, benevolence over bitterness, hope over despair, and believing the best instead of the worst – and seeing its result; the radiant sense of warmth and beauty that had come to define her.

And I wasn't alone in witnessing this. Upon her return home, my friends, many of them missing her as much as I did, would share how they were similarly impacted; how that short time they'd spent with her had soothed something deep within them they'd never named, but had always needed.

She and I were doing lots of walking, touring, and site seeing, so I got her some appropriate clothes. My friend Kathy Sano went with us. Together, we picked out a couple satin jogging suits (one olive green, with pink accents, and one, lavender and blue), a few mock

turtlenecks, a fashionable beret, and some black Reeboks. We also got her one of those little purses that you could wear as a backpack. For someone who grew up in an era where women didn't even wear pants, this was quite the departure, but she gamely went along with it.

I remember the first time I coaxed her into wearing the jogging suit. She emerged from the room, doubtfully, as if she was in danger of being stung by a wasp. I pulled on some kind of material sticking out the back, but the more I pulled, the more of it there was. It was then that I realized that she was still wearing the knee-length slip she wore beneath her dresses; tucked in at the waist. "What is this??" I ask her incredulously, trying to keep from laughing. "Well, I didn't know you weren't supposed to wear it with pants," she said.

My favorite picture of her and me was taken with us walking through SFO, the setting sun shining through the windows; us heading toward the plane that would take us back to Birmingham. She's dressed in one of her new jogging suits (which she'd taken to wearing all the time), a gold turtleneck, and her Reeboks.

The strap of what she'd come to call her "young lady purse" cuts diagonally across her torso, and a bunch of flowers wrapped in red paper, given to her by one of the many people who came to the airport to see her off, cradled in her right arm. I'm walking beside her, on her left, with a big shopping bag the same shade of red in my left hand; one overflowing with gifts given to her by many of those same people.

We walk along, her hand in mine, reminiscent of long-ago days when it was my hand in hers. A spring in her step, it is as if the trip has de-aged her. I feel something inside me that is a combination

ME AND MARY

of happiness, melancholy, and pride, but more than anything, I feel gratitude. In that moment, it is impossible to feel more blessed. I think about trying to express these things, but I change my mind. Instead, I squeeze her hand and she squeezes back. And we walk along, into the sunset, just me and Mary.

Epilogue

40. Presence

Summer 2008. It had been years since I'd last seen Bernice. I'd arrived in Birmingham that day, a day prior to my brother Joe's funeral. In the South, they traditionally hold "viewing hours" – a time for family and friends to see the departed and pay their respects less formally; usually, the evening before the actual service. One benefit of this is that people are able to begin coming to terms with the reality of the loss instead of it all hitting them at once.

My mother had, in the last year, already gone through more than most people could handle. While she and Joe Sr. had had a tumultuous 40 years, they nevertheless had 40 years; not all of them bad, and not unlike the character Albert in *The Color Purple*, he'd become an entirely different man in his later years.

But that's not quite accurate. According to Mary, this better version of us is always within us, and Joe, finally free from the mental illness that had so warped his personality, was able to be this person. Upon release from prison, he'd dedicate his life to service and become an AME (African Methodist Episcopal) lay pastor. This once violent and tortured man became his own opposite.

He started collecting imperfect produce from farms, then packaging it into baskets he delivered to the elderly and people with disabilities throughout Birmingham. He ferried people back and forth to doctor's appointments. He started mentoring young men, to help them avoid some of the mistakes he and his generation had made. I'd even find out, after his passing, that he, in clerical garb and with a Coptic cross around his neck, had manned a booth in support of ethnic minority LGBTQ+ teens at Birmingham's Pride festivities.

Tragically, the brutal cruelty of diabetes, the same disease that took his father, would take him, a piece at a time – first a toe, then a foot, a leg, a liver, and finally, his life. We agreed that Crystal would attend his funeral in order to offer support to Bernice. I purchased a ticket for her, and, on behalf of both of us, contributed to his burial costs. Later, she told me about the many attendees, all telling twenty-plus years of stories about this kind and gentle man. "It's hard to believe they were talking about the same person," she said.

On our way to the airport, Crystal asked me if I'd forgiven him, and when I said I had, she asked me how. I passed along the advice Mary had shared with me years earlier about extending forgiveness to those we least want to forgive; about finding just one good memory of them and latching onto it. "Then, you cultivate it like you would a tender shoot," I remember her saying. "It won't change what they done, but seeing how nobody's all bad will change what it does to you."

Crystal thought for a few minutes, gave a surprising "huh", then shared with me about the time a young Joe had carried her, upon her release from the hospital after a bout of pneumonia, two miles

home, in the Alabama winter. She was cold, so he'd taken off his coat and wrapped her up in it.

Bernice, who had stayed with Joe through his violence, through prison, and even served faithfully as a pastor's wife, would also stand by him through his long decline and eventual passing. But it would take time for her to fully forgive – not just him, but herself – him, for the things he'd done, and herself, for all she'd allowed him to do; especially to me. But eventually, she *would* get past it.

And just as I moved Crystal, Crystal would, in turn, move Bernice to California, where she'd create for herself a life more peaceful than she'd previously thought possible. She'd undertake the work of courageously facing down her own failings and making amends. And in doing so, she'd rediscover the kind, caring, perpetually joyful person she'd always been; the one my grandmother had never given up on. On this day, however, it was as if the very world was coming to an end.

Having buried the father only months prior, she now found herself contending with the son's death, while facing down the impending loss of her mother and the life-threatening illnesses that I, and all three of her daughters, were facing. Necie, who was too sick to come to her brother's funeral, would die the following year, Josie, six years later, followed by Marzell, Joe's daughter, and who would become another daughter to Bernice.

Georgia Marzell, who went by her middle name, was gentle, talented, wonderfully kind, and gorgeous; an actual beauty queen. A former Miss Georgia, she'd tracked down her father shortly before his passing. When she called the house, Bernice answered,

and when Marzell introduced herself, she said, “Yes, we know who you are. We’ve both been hoping you’d someday find us.”

Like me, my mother suffers from seizures, and shortly after Joe Sr.’s death, she’d blacked out and fallen; landing on a floor heater. Living alone at the time, she lay there for hours, the grate cooking into her flesh. It was Marzell, who, stopping by the house to check on her, found her. She ended up with deep, third-degree burns from her forehead down to her chin that required a number of painful skin grafts. She was early in this process when my brother suddenly and unexpectedly died.

When I walked into the funeral home, unbeknownst to me, she had arrived just prior, and had been escorted to the casket to view my brother’s body. I entered the room just as she was tentatively approaching him. Her back to me, I hear her gasp as she sees him and the reality of his passing – the loss of a child – hits her. I round the corner just as she mouths a near-silent “Oh Lord,” and turns away from the casket; nearly unable to keep her balance.

As she turns, I’m walking in, and for the first time in years, we see each other; her bandaged face an inscrutable mix of agonizing grief over seeing my brother dead and surprise/relief at seeing me, alive. “Rodney,” is all she says, half-cry and half-whisper, before falling into me. She’s sobbing brokenly. In between breaths, she says, for the first time ever, something I’d long quit expecting to ever hear her say – “I’m sorry.” “Shh, it’s OK,” I say. “I know you are.”

We stand there in silence, her, in my arms, until she, knowing about my most recent health challenges, looks at me in utter desolation and says, “You’re not going to leave me too, are you?” I doubt if I’ve ever been so heartbroken.

The morning after my brother's funeral, I go by the hospital to see my grandmother. Mary is unconscious and breathing shallowly, but otherwise, comfortable. Bernice is already there, along with Pat, Don, and Willie James. They say to Mary, "Rodney's here!" and she moans softly, as if she hears them. I hold her hand and she settles. Pat says she believes my grandmother has been waiting for me.

I'd wanted to come before now, but I'd been buried in work I was doing to help organize faith leaders in support of then-Senator Barack Obama's historic presidential run. It was the deep sense of spiritual resonance, the clear strains and resounding echoes of Martin, who had always been so central to my life, coming through in his message, that had drawn me to the campaign.

But some of it was personal; this deep sense of affinity I felt with this left-handed, mixed-heritage, African American fellow Columbia alum, raised by his own grandmother, and not much older than me; trying to do, quite literally, the impossible. I and thousands of others across the country jumped in to help out in whatever ways we could.

For me, that meant using lessons learned growing up in the cradle of the Civil Rights movement to lend courage to minority ministers, that an Obama win was indeed possible, and likewise, using my background as a Southern Baptist to help the campaign to go after every vote – including white-identifying Evangelicals. Sadly, the President and I would share one more similarity; both Mary and the grandmother who raised him, Madelyn Dunham, would pass away before the historic election.

Mary's health decline was rapid, and the worse she got, the more I wanted to drop everything and head to Birmingham, but that was at an immensely critical time in the campaign, and Pat convinced me otherwise; saying that my grandmother would hate taking me away from something so important.

And she was right. Mary was alive to see something she told me she thought she'd never see in her lifetime; an African American who might truly become President of the United States. I have this sense that whatever small role I might have played in helping make that happen was part of the important work she'd always believed I'd do, and that she, through her life, had equipped me to do.

There in the hospital room, the radio tuned to the old gospel music she loved, the kind my grandfather sang, playing softly in the background, the five of us; essentially, Mary's surviving kids, all visit for a while, and I offer to take Bernice to lunch and to give her a ride home.

I take her to a place that serves southern-style fish sandwiches, which I know to be her favorite, and we talk – really talk – for the first time in over a decade, if not longer. We talk about her life and where things went wrong. We talk about the impact her choices had on me and the kids. We are wholly and completely honest with each other. And in the midst of this conversation, my mother and I achieve, for the first time since all this happened, a real sense of reconciliation.

On my way to drop her off at her house, we discuss my grandmother and the mother she was to both of us. We both agree that we would rather see her pass on than suffer. The doctors had warned that even if she awakens, there will likely be brain damage.

We both know that's not the life she'd want. At her house, I kiss Bernice on the cheek, and, for the first time in my adult life, tell her that I love her, and when I do, I mean it. I help her out and she hugs me tearfully before I get in the car and drive off.

Not two minutes later, I get the call; Mary has just passed. With family members there keeping vigil in the room, she just quietly quit breathing when no one was watching, and she was gone. I turn the car around, pick up Bernice, who, in a matter of months, has lost husband, son and mother, and together, we head to the hospital.

On the way, however, I find I'm struck more by wonder than sorrow. "Leave it to Mary Moore," I say to myself, "To make sure that her daughter and I reconciled before leaving this plane." I can't get it out of my head that she was likely breathing her very last breath, her job done, just as Bernice and I were saying "I love you".

The two of us walk into the room we'd left a few hours before and everyone looks up at me, as if they'd been waiting. The machines have all been turned off, and all is silent except for the radio. At one point, the Dixie Hummingbirds' *Beaming from Heaven* comes on, ("I see the window, I see the door; this world don't seem like home anymore. Gates of the City swing open wide; dear friends and loved ones waiting inside,") and it feels like a message.

A grief-stricken Pat, tears flowing, turns and asks me what I want to do now. I stand there mute, unsure of what's being asked of me until Don walks over and clasps me on the shoulder. Then he says, in a watery voice, "You're the head of the family, now."

It was important to me that the family come together to make this occasion far more of a celebration of her life than a commemoration

of her passing; which we did. Mary would have been proud. She had very few wishes for her funeral, but one of them was that I sing.

The service itself, planned by Pat and me, was a wonderful testament to my grandmother and the family she created. My cousin Sonya sang one of Mary's favorite songs; a rendition of "*Precious Lord, Take My Hand*" that was so moving that everyone was in tears before she was even halfway through. I concluded the service with a medley that included "*Three Times a Lady*," by the Commodores.

*"Thanks for the joy that you've given me – the memories are all in my
mind.*

*And now, that we've come to the end of this rainbow, there's something
I must say out loud:*

You're once, twice, three times a lady, and I love you, I love you."

Tears falling and voice faltering, I nevertheless continued:

*"You shared our dreams, our joys, our pain; you made our lives worth
living for.*

*And if I had to live my life over again, I wouldn't change a moment with
you.*

You're once, twice, three times a lady, and I love you, I love you."

I held it together until the end. Barely. But after being the one, along with my cousin and Pat's son, Cedric, to manage all of the logistical arrangements, neither he nor I was much good from that moment on. Luckily, we had the rest of the family to take care of us.

The next morning, after a fitful night's sleep, I get up early and go for a drive. I need time to work this through in my own way. A soft morning rain falling, I just take off; driving south on I-65 when it hits

me that I want to see the Black Warrior River – a place my grandmother has often talked about, but that I’ve never seen – a place from her past.

I stop to buy a map and the hippy, blonde woman behind the register asks, “What you looking for, Honey?” I tell her that I’m headed to the Warrior River. “What for?” she responds, looking genuinely puzzled. “It ain’t nothin’ but water.”

I meet up with the river near Tuscaloosa, where I have lunch at a wonderful small town café – the kind with mix-matched furniture – on a picturesque downtown street. The restaurant is one of those places with a dizzying array of delicious side items – grits, macaroni and cheese, collard greens, bread pudding, creamed corn, yams, stuffing and biscuits and gravy – all called “vegetables”.

I’m sitting in one of those old metal chairs perusing the menu, when I hear Gladys Knight singing, *You’re the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me*. I put the menu down and simply listen, my mind and heart full of gratitude and longing.

I spend the afternoon sitting by the river, thinking of Mary, feeling fortunate that so much of her had flowed through my life and recognizing how, even now, I’m still being carried along by her current. Constant and dynamic, caressing and relentless, she had always been like water in my life. Watching that river lazily flow, I can’t help but smile.

On my way back, I stop by Oak Mountain State Park, where my large extended family is spending the day; just as my grandmother would have liked. There’s lots of barbequing and card playing, and the kids are swimming in the lake. But the highlight is the hilarious,

spontaneous “Ike and Tina” impersonation from *What’s Love Got to Do with It*, done by my sister, Josie and my cousin, Richard, with my young, identical twin cousins hopping in to flawlessly pull off the choreographed dancing in the background.

Josie, a natural ham, says, “This is for you, Grandma,” before flipping her long hair Tina-style, and launching into a pitch-perfect Angela Bassett, saying, “*We’re gonna start out... nice and easy... and we’re gonna finish... nice... and... ROUGH!*” I doubt karaoke *Proud Mary* has ever been done better, or that I’ve ever laughed harder.

And as for our own “Proud Mary”, I’m certain she was looking on, both amused by her family’s antics, and pleased that this kind of joyfulness was part of how we’d chosen to remember her. Because this was the safe space she’d always held for us, and the fervent hope she’d always had for us.

Though Mary is no longer here in the way she once was, I know she’s not far. There’s not a day that goes by where I don’t acutely feel her presence. In my life and work, I do my best to honor all that she passed on to me – this legacy of optimism and humanity; gratitude and determination; dignity and humility; faith, hope and love. And family.

Tonya, one of my dearest cousins, faithfully sends me “just thinking about you” emails, and not a month goes by where I’m not in touch with someone from the South. Don calls me regularly, as does my cousin Cedrick. Before my grandmother’s passing, none of us took the time to connect in this way; another gift that she gave me, even as she departed.

One of my all-time favorite songs is *If These Walls Could Speak*, written by Jimmy Webb and recorded by Amy Grant. It describes an ordinary house, one that, like any other house, has walls and floors, halls and rafters.

But houses are so much more than that. They're places where families reside, where love lasts, and where memories are made. I have the honor of that as my foundation in the world, as my starting point. And though the structure where those memories were made is gone, all that was built there remains. Even now, the strength drawn from those roots sustains me.

Not long ago, I was out walking and I caught wind of a familiar smell. Mary's front yard was populated by flowers, but the one that I remember most is the unique smell of lantanas. It grew there, alongside nobler plants such as roses, gardenias, and tulips – both her and my favorite. The smell of lantanas is so unique that even though the color variations are matched by shadings in the scent, the aroma is unmistakable.

She grew the orange-yellowish variation, and though I'd only come across it a couple of times in my adult life, I recognized it immediately. One of many, many reminders of how blessed I am, the fragrance instantly transports me back to that same front porch; to memories indelibly marked by the vivid color of balloons and the scent of pipe tobacco, waking up to cafeteria cake and waiting for the ice cream truck.

Of old walls that speak of love and family, and hallowed halls ringing with laughter and song. Of Sunday dinners and evening prayers, fires in the hearth and rain on the roof.

ME AND MARY

And each time, those memories both ground me and revive me. They connect me to my roots and give me hope for the future. They endow me with strength, and restore my soul. They remind me that I am, indeed, each of us is, the legacy of those who came before us. And in doing so, they infill me with peace, and stir within me an unshakable feeling – the feeling of home.

-- End --

About the Author

RD Moore is an artist, minister, lifelong social activist, emancipationist, and advocate for a better humanity.

He credits the people who, throughout his life, have crossed his path starting in his formative years in post-Civil Rights-era Birmingham for the person he'd become and for his unyielding faith in who we can be together.

Known for his intimate storytelling, authenticity, and insights grounded in empathy, his work continues to explore that fertile space where diversity, spirituality, and humanity all intersect.

He's founder of the *Mary Moore Institute for Diversity, Humanity & Society*, which works to create a future where everyone matters, and of a number of initiatives designed to help make this vision of a better "us" real in the world.

He can be reached via www.MaryMooreInstitute.org.

MEDIA GUIDE

Link to Spotify Playlist

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7LqnPXp3eCRtJ2YQxBjj3z?si=d8feb2f59db14463>



Link to Pandora Playlist

<https://www.pandora.com/playlist/PL:174251704429052354:74571774?part=ug-desktop&corr=74571774>



(A complete list of songs and who recorded them can be found in the PLAYLIST at the front of the book.)

--

Bonus musical track – *Wonderful World*

Original version written by Bob Thiele and George David Weiss.

Arranged and recorded by RD Moore

https://soundcloud.com/user-293014967-255836959/wonderful-world?si=8e7fe91fedbb40baaeb7d7b4aad34178&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing



Speeches and Addresses

(in order of appearance)

Martin Luther King – *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Birmingham, AL, April 16, 1963

Robert F Kennedy - *Statement on Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Indianapolis, Indiana, April 4, 1968

Malcolm X – *The Ballot or the Bullet*, Corey Methodist Church, Cleveland, OH, April 3, 1964

Martin Luther King – “*Street Sweeper*” speech (*Birth of a New Age*), Chicago IL, August 11, 1956

Books and Articles

(in order of appearance)

A Call for Unity – Open letter published in the *Birmingham News*, April 11, 1963

An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense – Open letter published in Alabama newspapers, January 16, 1963

Swiss Family Robinson – Johann David Wyss

Robinson Crusoe – Daniel Defoe

Winnie-the-Pooh – AA Milne

Richard Scarry books

Dr. Seuss books

Go, Dog. Go! – PD Eastman

Miss Suzy Squirrel – Miriam Young/Arnold Lobel

Three Boys series – Nan Hayden Agle

Hardy Boys series – Frank Dixon

Encyclopedia Brown series – Donald Sobol

Daredevil – Marvel Comics, 1964 – Present

1984 – George Orwell

The Autobiography of Malcolm X – Malcolm X and Alex Haley

The Count of Monte Cristo – Alexandre Dumas

RD MOORE

The Color Purple – Alice Walker

Films and Television

(in order of appearance)

Peyton Place, 1964 - 1969

The Clansman/Birth of a Nation, 1915

Gone with the Wind, 1939

The Color Purple, 1985

General Hospital, 1963 - Present

The Defiant Ones, 1958

Red Dirt, 2000

Superfly, 1972

Network, 1976

Happy Days, 1974 - 1984

Julia, 1968 – 1971

Six Million Dollar Man, 1973 - 1978

Leave it to Beaver, 1957 - 1963

The Wizard of Oz, 1939

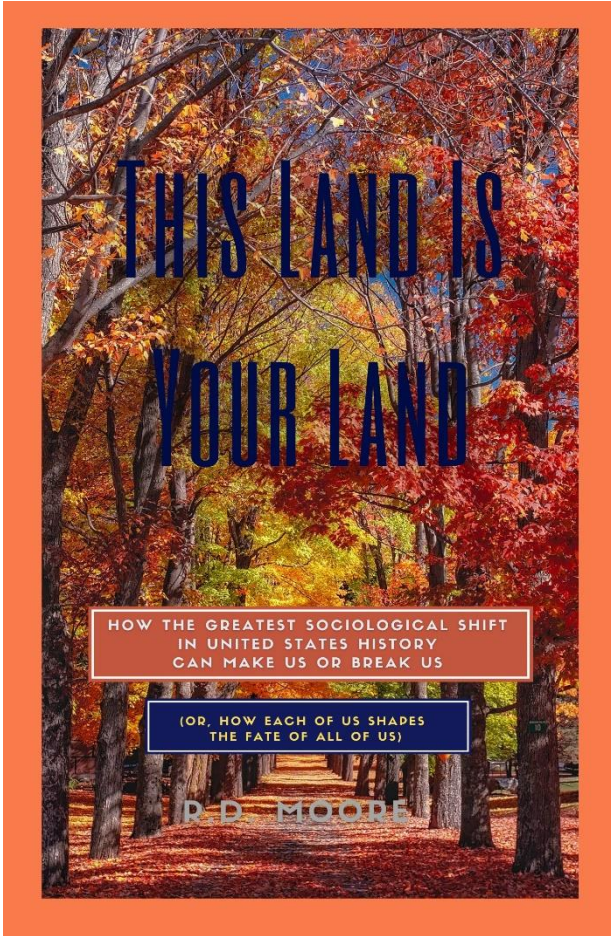
Charlie's Angels, 1976 - 1981

Philadelphia, 1993

Anastasia, 1997

What's Love Got to Do with it? - 1993

Also by RD Moore:



Available at:

www.marymooreinstitute.org.

